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Ideological Allies, Strategic Enemies: The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War in the Context of Cold War Geopolitics

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Introduction

"Twin opposites"—perhaps a fitting metaphor to portray the complex relationship between China and Vietnam. Bound by shared ideological foundations yet divided by centuries of rivalry, these two nations have navigated a precarious path oscillating between cooperation and conflict. Historically, China exerted profound cultural and political influence over Vietnam, met repeatedly by Hanoi's resilient resistance—from the early incursions of the Han Dynasty through the prolonged Ming occupation (From 111 BC to the 15th century AD).[1] This enduring dynamic of dominance and defiance manifested in the Cold War confrontation that erupted in 1979, reshaping not only Southeast Asia but also redefining China's regional role.

This conflict, commonly known as the Sino-Vietnamese War, constitutes the central focus of this research. Rather than merely reconstructing military events, the study aims to analyze how China strategically employed limited warfare to reaffirm its regional hegemony and test its geopolitical limits, particularly in the context of Cold War and in anticipation of the broader economic and political transformations that characterized the 1980s. At the same time, Vietnam's position emerges as equally crucial: Hanoi's trajectory towards economic and political reforms was undoubtedly intertwined with the broader Cold War context and directly shaped by this specific conflictual episode with Beijing.

If China and Vietnam can be considered ideological "twins", sharing similar revolutionary foundations and communist principles, it becomes crucial to understand why the conflict between them was far from accidental. The 1970s marked the period in which their mirrored trajectories diverged most sharply; despite their shared ideological commitments, they found themselves increasingly positioned on opposite sides of the Cold War chessboard.

Modern China, having risen from the devastation of civil war, stood as the colossus of the communist world, guided by Mao Zedong's adaptation of Marxism. Meanwhile, Vietnam, after enduring a brutal colonial war against France, found itself embroiled in an even more devastating conflict with the United States. The fall of Saigon in 1975 marked the ultimate triumph of Vietnamese communism, but peace proved elusive.

The Chinese politburo initiated a decisive rapprochement with the United States, a process that would culminate in the 1980s. Here, too, China's strategy was unmistakable, aligning with one of the 36 Stratagems, specifically the 23rd: "Befriend distant states while attacking those

[1] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, Table 5.1, p. 97.

nearby" (*yan jiao jin gong*).[2] In this case, the Soviet Union—later joined by Vietnam—became the target of this strategic maneuver.

For decades, China had provided indispensable support to Vietnam's war for independence, yet the moment Hanoi achieved unity, the fractures in their relationship deepened. Cambodia became the catalyst, as the Khmer Rouge—the ultra-Maoist regime backed by Beijing—clashed violently with Vietnam. When Vietnamese forces toppled Pol Pot's government in 1979, Beijing saw it as an unacceptable challenge to its regional authority. In response, on February 17, 1979, China launched a large-scale military incursion into northern Vietnam, aiming to "teach Hanoi a lesson". The offensive was short but intense—by March 16, China withdrew, leaving behind a battlefield littered with destruction but devoid of clear victors.

Yet, the war's significance transcended immediate battlefield outcomes. For China, it exposed fundamental weaknesses in its Maoist military doctrine, significantly accelerating Deng Xiaoping's military reforms and modernization efforts. Vietnam, although victorious in Cambodia, found itself internationally isolated and economically weakened. Thus, while neither country achieved decisive victory, the conflict entrenched a profound mutual distrust that continues to characterize Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Although military hostilities ceased by 1991, the war's legacy endures in contemporary regional dynamics. From Vietnam's strategic rapprochement with the United States to China's assertive stance in the South China Sea, underlying tensions persist. Initially perceived as merely a Cold War incident, the 1979 conflict has gained renewed relevance amid shifting alliances and escalating great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

This research draws upon a diverse but fragmented body of scholarship that has examined the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict from geopolitical, ideological, and historical perspectives. Early studies predominantly situated the war within Cold War dynamics, focusing heavily on the Sino-Soviet split and the strategic calculations of global powers.

The central objective of this study is to analyze how such an improbable conflict—an open warfare between two communist nations—came to happen. It relies primarily on secondary literature, including scholarly works, academic articles, and strategic analyses that shed light

[2] The "Thirty-Six Stratagems" (三十六计, Sānshíliù Jì) are an ancient collection of concise tactical maxims—primarily based on deception, manipulation, and the exploitation of circumstances—originally devised for warfare but now applied in diplomacy, politics, business, and even daily life. Unlike a systematic treatise, its authorship and date of composition remain unknown, though it was likely compiled between the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Rather than promoting a moral philosophy, it reflects a pragmatic, often cynical mindset. For further reading, see G. CASACCHIA (ed.), K. GAWLIKOWSKI (contrib.), *I 36 stratagemmi. L'arte cinese di vincere*, Italian edition, Guida Editori, Naples, 1990.

on the historical evolution of Sino-Vietnamese relations. Additionally, the research incorporates selected primary sources such as official declarations, declassified reports, and transcripts from dialogues between political and military leaders, allowing for a nuanced reconstruction of the strategic decisions and narratives of that era.

Although the existing historiography provides rich descriptive accounts of the conflict, it often falls short of fully exploring the prolonged historical developments that culminated in the 1979 war, as well as the subsequent phases of deteriorating and gradually normalizing relations leading up to 1991. Rather than viewing the conflict as an isolated incident, this thesis seeks to contextualize it within the wider trajectories of Vietnam's and China's Cold War experiences, highlighting critical junctures that defined their bilateral interactions and international alignments.

The thesis relies extensively on newspapers (primary sources) and secondary literature such as books and academic articles predominantly authored from Western perspectives. This reliance, however, reflects a broader phenomenon of historiographical neglect and obsolescence regarding the 1979 conflict in China and Vietnam—a significant aspect that will be explored in greater detail later in this research. Restrictive political environments in both countries, characterized by limited transparency and tightly controlled dissemination of historical records—a condition persisting even today—further limited access to more diverse primary sources. Additionally, despite having spent considerable time in Vietnam, I, the author, have rarely encountered materials or evidence capable of impartially enriching the historiographical investigation of this conflict, largely due to these constraints.

One potential weakness of this thesis lies in the wide scope of its historical analysis, beginning with French colonization and encompassing the Vietnam War with the United States in the first chapter. Given the breadth of this timeline, these early events are inevitably addressed in a concise and somewhat abbreviated manner, predominantly referencing China's role even though Vietnam remains the protagonist. However, such an approach is justified: even in periods when China did not hold the increasing global position it later assumed after Deng Xiaoping's reforms, it was already profoundly influential in the region. This enduring regional influence, driven by what could be defined as China's historically deep-rooted imperial ambitions, has often been overlooked or underestimated in historiography, yet remains essential for comprehensively understanding the dynamics underpinning Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Adopting a comparative historical approach, this academic piece seeks not only to dissect the conflict itself, but also to trace its roots and consequences within a broader framework of Cold War geopolitics. This study combines a multidimensional analysis—ideological,

diplomatic, military, and geopolitical—to understand how the rupture between Vietnam and China unfolded, evolved, and left lasting effects on the regional balance of power. Particular emphasis is placed on the ideological fractures within the socialist camp, the role of foreign policy realignments, and the strategic calculations behind both countries' actions.

The first chapter will unpack China's pivotal role in Vietnam's struggle for independence, revealing the ideological brotherhood and hidden frictions shaped by Cold War geopolitics. The second chapter traces the dramatic unraveling of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance after 1975, as the Cambodian conflict and Deng Xiaoping's strategic ambitions set the stage for confrontation. The third chapter analyzes the 1979 war—a brief but brutal clash—with a focus on military maneuvers, global reactions, and the divergent trajectories that followed in the '80s.

Understanding this war it's a necessary step to grasp the deeper historical trajectories that continue to shape Southeast Asian geopolitics. The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese conflict marked the first instance of open confrontation between two communist states, revealing the fragility of ideological solidarity and the primacy of national interests even within a supposedly unified bloc. Analyzing the origins, dynamics, and aftermath of the war allows us to better understand the enduring mistrust between Hanoi and Beijing, the evolution of China's strategic culture, and Vietnam's path toward diplomatic diversification. These elements are crucial for interpreting contemporary tensions in the South China Sea and for appreciating how historical memory influences regional alignments, threat perceptions, and national security doctrines to this day.

Chapter 1

1. Under the Red Banner: China's Role in Vietnam's Fight for Independence

1.1 France, China and the legacy of Indochina's Tribulations

The term "Indochina" emerged in the 19th century as a descriptor for the Southeast Asian region influenced by both Indian and Chinese civilizations. Coined by European scholars, the term underscored the cultural, linguistic, and historical connections that linked these two great civilizations with the region.[3]

This chapter aims to analyze China's role in Vietnam's struggle for independence, focusing on the geopolitical dynamics that shaped the conflict. It examines how Vietnam navigated colonial oppression, ideological battles, and foreign interventions, particularly from France, the U.S., China, and the Soviet Union. The goal is to understand how Ho Chi Minh leveraged external support while maintaining national sovereignty and how Vietnam's independence was both a military and diplomatic achievement, deeply intertwined with Cold War rivalries.

Initially conceptualized as a geographic and anthropological term, "Indochina" later acquired a political meaning under French colonial administration, referring specifically to Vietnam, divided into the southern Cochinchina, central Annam, and northern Tonkin, as well as Laos and Cambodia. The name reflects the region's role as a cultural and historical crossroads, shaped by enduring interactions with India and China, while also embodying the classificatory framework imposed by European colonial powers.[4]

The history of Indochina has been profoundly shaped by its geographical proximity to China, whose influence has permeated the region for over a millennium. The Chinese Empire persistently sought to expand its cultural, economic, and territorial reach, with Vietnam often serving as the focal point of these ambitions. Efforts to assert dominance frequently manifested in military occupations and ongoing conflicts with local kingdoms. However, the interactions between China and the region were far from solely aggressive. They were equally cultural and

[3] P. BROCHEUX, D. HÉMERY, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (L. L. Dill-Klein, Trans.), University of California Press, Oakland, 2009, pp. 1-3.

[4] *Ibidem*; J. S. BALBI, *System of Universal Geography: Founded on the Works of Malte-Brun and Balbi*, vol. 2, Adam and Charles Black, Edinburgh, 1842, p. 742. "South-East Asia is an extensive region, which lies to the south-east of India and south-west of China, is possessed by several distinct nations, and divided into various independent states, but bears no general distinctive name. Some geographers have proposed to call it India beyond the Ganges, or the Farther Peninsula; others, Indo-China; and Malte Brun calls it Chin-India".

transformative, marked by the imposition and subsequent adaptation of Chinese governance models, Confucian ideals, and administrative frameworks by local societies.[5]

Vietnam bears significant cultural parallels to China, deeply rooted in the enduring influence of Confucian thought. The prominence of hierarchical family structures, ancestor worship, and the incorporation of Chinese customs into life-cycle rituals such as marriages and funerals underscore this shared heritage. Confucian principles shaped Vietnam's governance and educational systems, while the Vietnamese language absorbed Chinese characters and vocabulary, leaving an indelible mark on its written and spoken forms.[6]

The region was regarded by France as a strategically and economically valuable territory for nearly a century, from 1858 to 1954. Paris saw in Indochina an opportunity to secure privileged access to the vast Chinese market, thereby bolstering its trade and influence in the region. This ambition was driven by the broader imperial rivalry with Great Britain, which had already established a strong foothold along China's southern coast. France sought to assert its presence in the South China Sea, competing for dominance in an area critical to trade and power projection.[7]

Several factors motivated France's colonization of Indochina. The first was the shifting European balance of power in the late 19th century. Following its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), France faced diminished influence within Europe. In response, French foreign policy turned outward, focusing on Asia and Indochina in particular, to sustain its global standing and economic growth. Colonization became a means of compensating for territorial and prestige losses in Europe, allowing France to project strength on the world stage. [8]

The *Commission de la Cochinchine* in 1857 emphasized the urgency of securing these territories to prevent rivals like Britain, the Dutch, and Russia from monopolizing Southeast Asia. Establishing control over Indochina was not just an economic or strategic imperative; it was also a matter of national pride. The creation of a "French Singapore" in Saigon symbolized this vision, demonstrating France's determination to rival other imperial powers in the Far East.[9]

[5] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, pp. 104-116.
[6] L. T. HIEU, "Confucian Influences on Vietnamese Culture", *Vietnam Social Sciences*, No. 5(169), 2015, pp. 71–82.
[7] P. BROCHEUX, D. HÉMERY, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954,* pp. 13-14; pp. 151-168.
[8] *Ibidem*.
[9] *Ibidem*.

Furthermore, France's intervention was facilitated by the decline of Qing[10] authority in the region. As China struggled with internal instability and external pressures, its ability to maintain its influence over Vietnam eroded. France exploited this power vacuum, using both military intervention and diplomacy to establish control. The weakening of the Qing dynasty thus provided an opportune moment for France to expand its empire, securing a foothold in Indochina and asserting dominance in Southeast Asia.[11]

Given all this factors, during the Second Opium War (1856–1860)[12]. France initiated its expansion into Southeast Asia, starting in the Mekong region. In 1858, French and Spanish forces captured the port of Tourane (modern-day Da Nang), but strong Vietnamese resistance, logistical challenges, and tropical diseases stalled their progress. Redirecting their focus, the French seized Saigon in 1859, capitalizing on its strategic value as a rice supplier. The Treaty of Saigon (1862) formalized French control over three provinces of Cochinchina and granted religious freedom to Christians, solidifying their foothold in southern Vietnam.[13]

Napoléon III used Catholic missions as both a moral justification and a strategic tool for colonial expansion, portraying France as a protector of Christians while missionaries paved the way for administrative control. This alignment of religious and geopolitical goals strengthened France's position in Indochina and bolstered Napoléon III's domestic support. By 1867, France had annexed all of Cochinchina, transforming it into a French colony and a base for further expansion.[14]

At the end of the 1860s and early '70s, France has been engaged with domestic challenges after the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of the Second Empire, shifted its focus to internal reconstruction under the Third Republic. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese court in Huế sought to consolidate its control over Annam and Tonkin but remained weakened by internal divisions and external pressures. This period allowed France to stabilize its administration in Cochinchina, laying the groundwork for future expansion.[15]

[10] The Qing dynasty (1644–1912), was the last imperial dynasty of China, known for its administrative reforms, territorial expansion, and interactions with neighboring states, including Vietnam.

[11] P. BROCHEUX, D. HÉMERY, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954*, pp. 9-10

[12] Also known as the Arrow War (1856–1860), this conflict was fought between the Qing dynasty of China and a coalition of the British Empire and the French Empire. Triggered by disputes over trade rights, diplomatic relations, and the opium trade, the war led to the Treaty of Tientsin and the Convention of Peking, which further opened China to foreign influence, ceded territory, and deepened tensions between China and Western powers. The war significantly impacted China's sovereignty and regional stability.

[13] P. BROCHEUX, D. HÉMERY, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954*, pp. 24-26.

[14] *Ivi*, pp. 17-27.

[15] *Ivi*, pp. 27-28.

Despite setbacks following the Franco-Prussian War, French commitment to Indochina remained strong under the Third Republic. Economic stagnation and competition with England and Germany heightened the importance of the colony, which became a critical source of raw materials like rice and silk, as well as a market for French goods. Institutions like the Banque de l'Indochine further integrated the region's economy into France's imperial system, ensuring the colony's role in sustaining French industrial and financial interests.[16]

The Philastre Treaty of 1874 established Annam as a virtual French protectorate, ending its tributary relationship with China and granting France control over its foreign policy. However, China rejected this interpretation, asserting that Annam could not make such agreements without Chinese consent. Misunderstandings, including translation errors, further strained relations.[17]

These ambiguities, combined with Tonkin's strategic importance, motivated the French prime minister Jules Ferry[18] to pursue expansion in the region during his premierships. The growing French influence clashed with China's claims of sovereignty, setting the stage for the Sino-French conflict.[19]

To fully grasp the conflict, it is essential to consider the Chinese cultural perspective. The orthodox Confucian worldview that shaped Chinese foreign relations emphasized a strict hierarchical structure, with the Emperor of China positioned at the apex of a pyramid of relationships. This model regarded all other states as subordinate "barbarians", whose recognition of Chinese supremacy was necessary for harmonious relations.[20]

Reciprocity, in the Confucian sense, required vassal states to demonstrate deference and fulfill obligations in return for protection and cultural guidance. The idea of equality among nations was alien to this framework, making the notion of a state like Annam declaring independence an affront to China's traditional authority. Western concepts of sovereignty and

[16] P. BROCHEUX, D. HÉMERY, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954*, 34-39. In the 1870s-1880s, Cochinchina accounted for 45% of the global rice trade, while Lyon's textile industry relied on Chinese silk for 42% of its imports. The Banque de l'Indochine, founded in 1875 with an initial capital of 5 million francs, facilitated the colony's economic integration. With French exports declining from 4.25 billion francs in 1870 to 4 billion in 1877, Indochina became crucial to balancing the trade deficit and supporting imperial expansion.

[17] L. M. CHERE, *The Diplomacy of the Sino-French War (1883-1885): Global Complications of an Undeclared War*, vol. 3 of *West and the Wider World*, Cross Cultural Publications, Cross Roads Books, Montreal, 1988, pp. 5-17.

[18] Jules Ferry served twice as France's Prime Minister (1880–1881, 1883–1885) and was a key advocate of colonial expansion, promoting imperial policies in Africa and Asia, including Indochina. While renowned for education reforms in France, his tenure is also marked by local resistance and colonial controversies.

[19] L. M. CHERE, *The Diplomacy of the Sino-French War (1883-1885): Global Complications of an Undeclared War*, pp. 4-7.

[20] *Ivi*, pp. 9-11.

autonomy, introduced through treaties like those involving France and Annam, deeply offended Chinese traditionalists.[21]

The Confucian framework, with its focus on hierarchical order, harmony, and reciprocal obligations, profoundly influenced China's resistance to foreign encroachments. The Sino-French War exemplifies how this worldview shaped China's perception of external challenges and its insistence on dominance over neighboring states.

Even occurring over a century before the focus of this research, this cultural perspective highlights persistent patterns in China's approach to regional power dynamics. These continuities provide valuable insights into China's historical and modern responses to external pressures and regional conflicts.

The Sino-French War ended in 1885 with the Treaty of Tientsin, marking a crucial shift in regional geopolitics. While the conflict demonstrated French military superiority, it also highlighted China's weakening influence over its tributary states. Under the treaty, France secured control over Tonkin (northern Vietnam) and Annam, effectively dismantling the tributary relationship between these territories and the Qing Empire.[22] In 1887 the *Union Indochinoise* was officially created through decrees, directly subordinating the region under the Ministry of the Colonies.[23]

All this brought China to elaborate a new strategy for the region. It respected the Franco-Chinese compromise but sought to maintain control over Vietnam through calculated and limited aid to local adversaries of the French. Beijing avoided direct confrontation, focusing instead on long-term goals of limiting French expansion and reshaping the peninsula into a network of subordinate states aligned with Chinese interests.[24]

1.2 Ho Chi Minh, Communism, The Path to Vietnamese Independence

French colonization, despite numerous revolts and growing nationalist movements between 1900 and 1940, remained relatively stable until the outbreak of World War II.[25] The colonial administration, though increasingly challenged by local resistance, maintained control over the

[21] L. M. CHERE, *The Diplomacy of the Sino-French War (1883-1885): Global Complications of an Undeclared War*, pp. 9-11.
[22] P. BROCHEUX, D. HÉMERY, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization*, pp. 46-69.
[23] *Ivi*, p. 77.
[24] *Ivi*, p. 69.
[25] *Ivi*, pp. 281-335.

region, leveraging economic exploitation and administrative reforms to sustain its dominance.[26]

However, this fragile stability was suddenly disrupted in 1940 with the fall of France to Nazi Germany. The Vichy regime's acquiescence to Japanese demands for access to Indochina marked the beginning of a profound shift, as Japan's occupation gradually sidelined French authority and intensified local discontent.[27] This transition not only weakened the colonial framework but also created a power vacuum that would ultimately accelerate the rise of nationalist movements and set the stage for Vietnam's struggle for independence.

In 1945, Japan in point of losing the conflict was outnumbered in Vietnam by French troops trying to retain control of Vietnam. Without any capability to fight in inferior number and at the end of the war Tokyo decided to back a coup the 9th of March[28], bringing the emperor Bao Dai[29] to declare the independence of the "Empire of Vietnam". The new government unified territorially the country and catalyzed the rise of nationalistic sentiment in the country.[30]

With the fall of Japan in August 1945 French attempt regain possess on the colony became more plausible. In response to that, Bao Dai gave away his dynastic name and the same monarchy served to legitimize the French colonial control on Vietnam for decades. Bao Dai's abdication weakened French colonial legitimacy, strengthening the nationalist movement and clearing the way for Ho Chi Minh to emerge as the leading force in Vietnam's independence struggle.[31]

The 2nd of September 1945 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was formally declared independent in Hanoi, the new capital. The nationalist sentiment, which had germinated over decades, suddenly came into full bloom. However, this was not enough to solidify in the short period the latest established government, still fragile. [32]

As a matter of fact, the Allied victory in World War II divided Vietnam into two zones of influence: the Chinese Nationalists were responsible for disarming Japanese forces north of the 16th parallel, while the British managed the south. The British decision to reinstate French

[26] P. BROCHEUX, D. HÉMERY, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization*, pp. 323-327.
[27] *Ivi*, pp. 340-341
[28] On March 9, 1945, Japan staged a coup d'état in Vietnam, overthrowing the French colonial administration to assert full control over the territory during World War II.
[29] Bảo Đại (1913–1997) was the last emperor of Vietnam, ruling under French colonial influence from 1926 to 1945. He abdicated in 1945 following the August Revolution led by Hồ Chí Minh but later served as head of state of the French-backed State of Vietnam (1949–1955). His rule ended when Ngô Đình Diệm ousted him in a 1955 referendum, leading to the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam.
[30] C. E. GOSCHA, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*, ePub edition, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2022, p. 42.
[31] *Ivi*, p. 43.
[32] *Ivi*, pp. 43-45.

control over southern Vietnam led to significant conflict. In late September, French colonial troops, supported by British forces, reaffirmed control over Saigon, displacing Ho's government and triggering widespread resistance.[33]

But the Chinese refused to allow the French to regain control immediately, which indirectly helped Ho Chi Minh consolidating power. Over time, this division set the stage for a deeper geopolitical struggle, as the Viet Minh prepared for a prolonged resistance against French colonial forces, eventually marking the beginning of the First Indochina War.[34]

The Viet Minh or Viet Nam Doc lap Dong minh (Vietnamese Independence League) was a coalition created by Ho Chi Minh in 1941. The vision in creating this united front came from China. After the Japanese invasion of China Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam from Russia passing through China during his trip. There, he was inspired by the revolutionary united forces created by Mao Zedong to fight Japan. With the Viet Minh Ho was able to mobilize people, first against the Japanese and then against the French.[35]

In the context of the First Indochina War, the creation of the Viet Minh underscores significant parallels between the communist rise in China and Vietnam. Given the relevance of this comparison to the scope of the research, a comparative analysis of these revolutionary processes offers valuable insights. While a detailed investigation of both movements lies beyond the limits of this study, the analysis will focus on key parallels before, during, and after the First Indochina War. This approach aims to outline the trajectory, previously mentioned, that connects China and Vietnam under the banner of communism.

Building on the historical circumstances briefly outlined earlier, both China and Vietnam experienced oppression under Western imperialism. While the manifestations of this phenomenon differed, they were equally subjugating in their impact. Exemplifying that: Chinese share of the global GDP dropped from one-third in 1820 to less than 10% in 1913. Because of the times, the Communist Party of China was founded in 1921. Within his founding fathers there was Mao Zedong.[36]

Ho Chi Minh, born Nguyen Sinh Cung[37] in 1890, moved to France in 1911. In 1920, he became one of the founding members of the French Communist Party, drawing inspiration from

[33] C. E. GOSCHA, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*, pp. 47-48.
[34] *Ibidem*.
[35] *Ivi*, pp. 47-49.
[36] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 148-152.
[37] Ho Chi Minh, born as Nguyễn Sinh Cung, adopted several names throughout his life, reflecting his personal and political evolution. From Nguyễn Tất Thành ("He who fulfills his will") to Nguyễn Ái Quốc ("Nguyễn the Patriot"), his names symbolized his revolutionary commitment and efforts to evade colonial surveillance. The

Lenin's *"Theses on the National and Colonial Questions"*[38]. In the years that followed, he emerged as a prominent advocate for Vietnamese independence, actively engaging with the rising communist movement across Europe and traveling extensively throughout the continent to promote his cause.[39]

Upon returning to Asia, Ho Chi Minh founded the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930 in Hong Kong. A key similarity between the Chinese and Vietnamese communist movements was their shared strategy of opposing imperialism by mobilizing rural populations and conducting prolonged, exhausting struggles against foreign powers in their respective countries.[40]

Party discipline, socialist internationalism was central to achieve the mobilize support int the rural and peasant population, especially considering the weight this has in both the pre-industrialized economies.[41]

However, a significant difference in their long-term strategies could help us in understanding the underlying frictions that emerged between China and Vietnam in the second half of the 20th century. Rooted in China's self-perception as a global leader, Mao Zedong envisioned the mission of "national liberation" as a movement to be extended beyond China, with the aim of influencing revolutionary struggles worldwide. In contrast, Ho Chi Minh's ambitions were far more focused: his primary goal was to end French colonial rule and secure independence for Vietnam.[42]

Despite some minor differences, the Chinese Revolution served as a key example of success that Ho Chi Minh regarded with great attention. While proximity and similarities between the two movements were significant, it was the ultimate victory of the Chinese Revolution that influenced him most intensely. Referencing Ho Chi Minh's words:

> Comrade Mao Tse-tung has skillfully "Sinicized" the ideology of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, correctly applied it to the practical situation of China, and has led the Chinese Revolution to complete victory…Thanks to the experiences of the Chinese Revolution and to Mao Tse-tung's thoughts, we have

name Ho Chi Minh ("Bringer of Light") became his definitive identity in the 1940s, marking his leadership in Vietnam's independence movement. For simplicity, he will be referred to as Ho Chi Minh throughout this text.

[38] *Theses on the National and Colonial Questions* (1920) is a document drafted by Lenin for the Second Congress of the Communist International. It outlines revolutionary strategies in national and colonial contexts, advocating for the right to self-determination of oppressed peoples as part of the broader struggle against imperialism.

[39] P. BROCHEUX, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 7-22.

[40] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 153-154.

[41] *Ivi*, pp. 154-155.

[42] *Ivi*, pp. 154-157.

further understood the ideology of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin and consequently scored many successes. This the Vietnamese revolutionaries must engrave on their minds and be grateful for.[43]

The success of Chinese communists in 1949 significantly made the path smoother and adjusted the trajectory of the Vietnamese revolutionary path. For instance, Ho Chi Minh's concept of state diverged from the one originally aimed at in the declaration of 1945, transforming Vietnam from a coalition-based government into a single-party communist state.[44]

The Vietnamese communists adopted methods inspired by the Chinese and Soviet revolutionary playbooks, including rectification campaigns, struggle sessions, cadre training, and the promotion of a cult of personality centered around Ho. In 1951, Ho Chi Minh oversaw the establishment of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, replacing the earlier Communist Party established in Hong Kong. [45]

This aligned Vietnam more closely with Moscow and Beijing. That's because it formalized Vietnam's commitment to the global socialist movement led by the Soviet Union and China. By adopting a structured, party-led system modeled after the Soviet and Chinese communist parties, Vietnam integrated itself more deeply into the international communist bloc, securing political, ideological, and material support from both powers.[46]

Additionally, Ho Chi Minh toke the concept of "War Communism" originated in Soviet Russia. Involving the total mobilization of the state's resources—economy, army, and manpower—to support the war effort. It required the rural population to supply food for urban areas and soldiers, ensuring the regime's survival.[47]

At the operational level, Mao deployed a large political-military advisory group to Vietnam, facilitating the training of Ho Chi Minh's regiments just across the border. In November 1949, Ho Chi Minh instituted mandatory military service for all Vietnamese citizens aged 18 to 45. The Chinese victory marked a turning point, dividing the resistance into two distinct phases: the first, defined by low-intensity guerrilla operations, and the second, characterized by a

[43] H. CHI MINH, *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66*, edited by B. B. FALL, Signet Books, New York City, 1968, p. 190. "*Political report read at the second national congress of the Viet-Nam workers party, held in February, 1951*".

[44] C. E. GOSCHA, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*, p. 36-37.

[45] *Ivi*, p. 36.

[46] *Ibidem*.

[47] *Ivi*, p. 37-38. "War Communism" (Военный коммунизм) was a Bolshevik policy (1918–1921) during the Russian Civil War, involving the nationalization of industries, requisitioning of agricultural goods, and compulsory labor to sustain the war effort. While it ensured regime survival, it caused severe economic hardship, leading to its replacement by the New Economic Policy in 1921.

higher-scale conflict that, while still guerrilla-based, adopted a more structured and expansive approach.[48]

The first real conventional engagement between French troops and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) happened in January of 1951. The Vietnamese troops, commanded by Vuong Thua Vu[49] attacked enemy positions in Vinh Yen, located at northeast from Hanoi. For the first time, the PAVN faced napalm and other weaponry that their guerrilla tactics had previously allowed them to avoid.[50]

In the following months, the PAVN rapidly expanded the territory controlled by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, intensifying pressure on French officials. In response, the French decided to establish a Vietnamese partner army to support their counter-resistance efforts. This move allowed France to mobilize the Vietnamese population, particularly to provide critical logistical support to the French Army. In doing so, the French effectively mirrored Ho Chi Minh's move from the previous year.[51]

Starting from the 1950 the economic instruments became essential in the French approach. Rice was in the center of this strategy. The French aimed to deprive the PAVN of the food necessary to sustain their war effort by bombing agricultural fields, destroying irrigation systems, and contaminating water supplies. While China was able to supply modern weaponry to their Vietnamese allies, they were unable to provide sufficient food due to internal shortages, further exacerbating the burden on PAVN resources.[52]

Nevertheless, the Vietnamese addressed economic challenges and famine by enforcing strict state control over food production. Rice producers and village leaders were required to report yields and stock levels, while cadres inspected silos and enforced compliance with requisition laws. Special harvest units were created to prevent crops from rotting when workers were conscripted, and even PAVN units paused military operations to assist with harvesting.[53]

At the same time, Ho Chi Minh had to contend with a severe economic and monetary crisis. To stabilize the economy and sustain the war effort, the communists introduced the agricultural tax, requiring producers to contribute rice and other essential goods to feed the army, civil servants, and workers. With inflation rendering currency nearly worthless, rice effectively

[48] C. E. GOSCHA, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*, pp. 253-255.
[49] Vương Thừa Vũ, a Vietnamese general and revolutionary leader, played a significant role during the First Indochina War. As commander of the Hanoi Military Region, he contributed to several key victories against French forces.
[50] C. E. GOSCHA, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*, pp. 318-320.
[51] *Ivi*, pp. 324-329.
[52] *Ivi*, pp. 329-340.
[53] *Ivi*, pp. 329-342.

replaced the dong as the national currency, forming the backbone of the national budget during the war.[54]

Having stabilized or at least mitigated all these complications, there was the necessity for a major battle openly the French army to increase the moral of the PAVN and demoralize the French. On 13 of March 1954 the Vietnamese started to bomb the French base in Dien Bien Phu, in North-Western Vietnam.

The siege of the French headquarters started soon after the artillery barrage, as planned by Vo Nguyen Giap[55]. Just twelve thousand French troops had to defend and hold the base surrounded by more than 50.000 Vietnamese. Three waves of assaults followed for 7 weeks.[56]

Initially, they isolated the French base by capturing strategic outposts, cutting supply lines, and using trenches and tunnels to neutralize French artillery and disrupt aerial resupply. This was followed by sustained assaults on key strongholds, employing human wave tactics to overwhelm French defenses, deplete their resources, and weaken morale.

The *human wave* strategy relied on successive infantry assaults to exhaust enemy resources and morale. Combining positional warfare with continuous encroachment, it used trenches and tunnels for cover. Sustained pressure and fresh unit rotations neutralized fortified positions, forcing surrender through attritional warfare.[57] This approach, common among communist-aligned forces from Stalingrad to Indochina via Korea, emphasized mass offensives and strategic encirclement. Giap continued this strategy across all three Indochina Wars, adapting it against French, U.S., and Chinese forces to counter superior firepower through endurance and tactical ingenuity.

In the final phase, concentrated assaults targeted the core of the French defenses, breaching the perimeter and using captured artillery to intensify attacks, ultimately forcing the French to surrender after weeks of relentless pressure.[58] The PAVM successfully conquered the base and marked the most important moment of the First Indochinese War. Still, the battle had an enormous human cost for Giap and Ho Chi Minh: approximately 20.000 casualties.[59]

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[54] C. E. GOSCHA, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*, pp. 342-346.

[55] Võ Nguyên Giáp, a prominent Vietnamese general and strategist, was a key figure in Vietnam's fight for independence. Known as the architect of major victories against France at Điện Biên Phủ (1954) and later against the United States, he combined guerrilla tactics with conventional warfare. His leadership solidified his legacy as one of the 20th century's most influential military commanders.

[56] C. E. GOSCHA, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam,* pp. 431-432.

[57] V. N. GIAP, *The Military Art of People's War: Selected Writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap*, edited and with an introduction by R. STETLER, Monthly Review Press, New York/London, 1970, p. 152.

[58] C. E. GOSCHA, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*, pp. 431-441.

[59] *Ivi*, p. 441.

The defeat at Dien Bien Phu forced France to the bargaining table. In July 1954, the Geneva Accords determined that Vietnam would be divided into two zones along the 17th parallel, with a demilitarized zone established between them. However, the Nationalist Government of South Vietnam refused to ratify the treaty in protest.[60]

The First Indochina War resulted in approximately 500,000 casualties, including 59,745 French deaths. This war not only led to the formal establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam but also became a pivotal moment in the broader process of decolonization, inspiring other colonial territories to resist French imperial rule.[61]

Paris was increasingly conscious of its diminished role in the emerging global order, which was becoming increasingly bipolar in the years following World War II. The rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States extended beyond Europe, where the Iron Curtain had already been drawn, to the "peripheries" of the world, including Vietnam, further shaping the geopolitical landscape.

1.3 Cold War ideologies and the American stance in Southeast Asia

The independence of Vietnam and the rise of the communists suggest that this process, though not entirely completed but stabilized by 1954, was deeply rooted in the broader context of the Cold War, as well as the decolonization of many other former colonies worldwide. Therefore, to establish the foundations of this research, it is essential to examine the Cold War balance of power and contextualize its dynamics within the Asian continent, especially in view of the Second Indochina War.

In this regard, the process that led the United States, after World War II, to focus on the global fight against communism must be understood within the dual context of the Cold War and the wave of decolonization sweeping across the globe. The end of the war saw the collapse of European colonial empires, creating a power vacuum in many regions, particularly in Asia, where communist movements were gaining momentum.

As the architect of the U.S. containment policy, George F. Kennan[62] stated in a famous article on Foreign Affairs in 1947, «the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet

[60] P. BROCHEUX, D. HÉMERY, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization*, pp. 370-372.
[61] *Ivi*, pp. 372-373.
[62] George F. Kennan (1904–2005) was an American diplomat and historian, best known as the architect of the U.S. containment policy against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. His "Long Telegram" (1946) and the subsequent X Article (1947) laid the foundation for U.S. strategy, influencing policies like the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. Though later critical of militarized containment, his ideas shaped Cold War geopolitics for decades.

Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies».[63] In 1947, any communist movement worldwide was seen as a Soviet expansion, a perception that persisted until the 1970s.

For this reason, the United States, committed to containment, backed Chiang Kai-shek[64] and the Kuomintang[65] as a bulwark against communism. Under Roosevelt and Truman, Washington saw the Nationalists as key Cold War allies. Despite China's fragmentation, the U.S. treated it as a "Big Five" power with a UN Security Council veto.[66] Defeated in 1949, the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan, relocating their capital to Taipei while preserving military, political authority, and China's UN seat.[67]

In Vietnam, the struggle for independence under Ho Chi Minh's leadership embodied a dual dynamic: the fight against colonial rule and a broader ideological alignment with global communism. In the emerging bipolar world, Ho Chi Minh aligned with the allegedly anti-colonial Soviet Union, sharing its ideology, objectives, and values.

This was encapsulated by Ho's political report read at the second national congress of the Vietnam workers party, held in February 1951:

> Aspiring to world hegemony, the United States brandishes dollars in one hand to lure the world people and an atomic bomb in the other to menace them. The Truman Program, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the Southeast Asia program are all U.S. maneuvers aiming at preparing a third world war.[68]

The "Report to the National Security Council by the Department of State, NSC 64" [69] in 1950 helps us in understanding the Truman administration[70] attitude towards Indochina

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[63] G. F. KENNAN ("X"), *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1947, accessed February 5, 2025.

[64] Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) led the Kuomintang (KMT), ruling China during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War. Defeated by Mao Zedong in 1949, he fled to Taiwan, establishing the Republic of China, where he ruled under martial law until his death.

[65] The Kuomintang (KMT), founded in 1912 by Sun Yat-sen, governed China until 1949 and then Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek. Initially a republican movement, it maintained one-party rule in Taiwan until democratization in the late 20th century.

[66] H. KISSINGER, *On China*, Penguin Press, New York, 2011, p. 91

[67] *Ivi*, pp. 91-92.

[68] H. CHI MINH, *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66*, p. 202.

[69] U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *Report to the National Security Council by the Department of State*, NSC 64, note by the Executive Secretary to the National Security Council on the Position of the United States With Respect to Indochina, accessed January 26, 2025, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d480. This report, adopted by the National Security Council on April 18, 1950, and approved by President Truman on April 24, 1950, constitutes a formal policy directive under U.S. law. As a presidentially endorsed NSC document, it held binding authority for federal agencies, mandating coordinated implementation by executive departments, particularly in matters of foreign policy and national security.

[70] The Truman administration (1945–1953) marked a pivotal era in U.S. foreign policy, characterized by the start of the Cold War and the containment strategy against communism. Key initiatives included the Truman Doctrine (1947) to support nations resisting Soviet influence, the Marshall Plan (1948) to rebuild Europe, and the establishment of NATO (1949).

context. The report highlighted the high priority of Indochina, identified as the area most immediately threatened by communist aggression in Southeast Asia. It proposed the establishment of a U.S. Military Advisory Group to assist French forces by providing training, logistical support, and strategic advice to improve their effectiveness against communist insurgents, even recognizing the limitations of French colonial force.[71]

Central to this document and the realm of foreign policy during the '50s in Asia is the "domino theory" brought by the same Truman administration and the following administration.[72] In this perspective the Korean War was a significant case study to better capture why the United Sates gradually passed from being an indirect actor in Indochina to play an active role.

On June 25, 1950, military confrontation started between Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), only separated by the 38th north parallel. With the South Korean Army in crisis just weeks after the invasion, President Truman, following a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution, successfully launched a military support initiative for the ROK, coordinated through a UN military command and bolstered by contributions from allied nations.[73]

In response to the free-world stance China, as well as done for Vietnam in the First Indochina War, exhibited a decisive support, this time directly by sending approximately 2.3 million[74] troops in Korea in the three years of conflict and spending $3.3 billion[75] to support North Korea. After more than 20 years of internal struggle, the sacrifice was driven by the Chinese Communist Party's aspiration to assert its role in the international communist movement alongside the Soviet Union.[76]

The war finished in a "draw" three years later with the armistice signed in July 1953. The result was a pristine border arrangement, with neither side gaining favorable terms regarding

[71] U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *Report to the National Security Council by the Department of State*, NSC 64.

[72] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, ePub edition, Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, New York, 2017, p. 292. "The domino theory, first invented for China, was moved to Vietnam. To them, the Cold War was a zero-sum game, in which a loss for one side was a gain for the other. And the Soviet Union, or, even worse, China, was seen as controlling Vietnamese Communism and standing to gain through its success".

[73] *Ivi*, pp. 161-162.

[74] X. LI, *China's Battle for Korea: The 1951 Spring Offensive*, ePub edition, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2014, p. 238.

[75] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, p. 240.

[76] *Ivi*, pp. 169-170. Also, Soviet Union was pivotal in the aiding the DPRK. "From April 1951 Stalin allowed Soviet pilots to fly combat missions, as long as they stayed within North Korean airspace. Around eight hundred Soviet pilots flew in Korea, mostly in MiG-15 fighter jets, which were the most advanced Soviet aircraft available. During the war both the level of cooperation and the mutual confidence of the Chinese and the Soviet side increased substantially, in spite of occasional disagreements over tactics among the three allies".

territory. Korea, especially the southern part, was devastated by the only "hot" war during the long clash within the United States and Soviet Union ,[77] even though the latter deployed only its air force.[78]

As a consequence of the war Truman decided to not run for the elections of 1952,[79] won by Dwight D. Eisenhower[80]. Substantially, not much changed in the American grand strategy to oppose the communist expansion across the globe. This was one of the main reasons he attracted votes for being elected.

The visit of the vice-president Richard Nixon[81] in Vietnam during the fall of 1953[82] and his statement after the Bien Ben Phu battle in April 1954 reveal a lot about the Eisenhower stance on the Second War of Indochina:

> We have a test of policy in Indo-China…This is not a civil war, it is a war of aggression by the Communist conspiracy against all the free-nations. The Chinese Communist government, support, controls and directs it. It is not a war to perpetuate French colonialism but to resist extension of Chinese communism… The aim of the United States is to hold Indo-China without war involving the United States, if we can. We have learned that if you are weak and indecisive, you invite war. You don't keep Communists out of an area by telling them you won't do anything to save it.[83]

Moreover, the United States hugely helped the French during the first Indochinese War, providing $385 million in financial and military support in 1953-1954. This aid was tied to France's promises of independence for Indochina. Eisenhower also pushed for a coalition to support France, avoiding direct ground involvement but strengthening regional resistance to communist forces.[84]

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[77] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, p. 173.

[78] X. LI, *China's Battle for Korea: The 1951 Spring Offensive*, p. 274. Moscow deployed the Sixty-Fourth Air Force Army to North Korea, engaging 26,000 Soviet personnel at its peak in 1952. Soviet pilots fought over 1,400 battles, downing 1,318 UN aircraft, mainly American F-86 Sabres. To conceal involvement, fallen pilots were sent to China and buried in Lushun (Port Arthur).

[79] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, p. 172.

[80] Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969), a five-star general and the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, led the successful D-Day invasion (1944) and played a pivotal role in the liberation of Nazi-occupied Europe. After the war, he became the first Supreme Commander of NATO before serving as the 34th President of the United States (1953–1961), leaving a legacy as both a military leader and a statesman.

[81] Richard Nixon (1913–1994), 37th President of the United States (1969–1974), previously served as Vice President under Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–1961). Known for his foreign policy achievements like pacification with the Soviet Union, opening relations with China, and ending U.S. involvement in Vietnam. His presidency ended with resignation due to the Watergate scandal.

[82] "Nixon Clarifies Position on Asia", *New York Times*, April 21, 1954, p. 4. During his October 31 visit, Vice President Nixon reflected on Vietnam's independence as vital for Southeast Asia's freedom, urging stronger efforts against communism and aligning U.S. and French objectives.

[83] "Nixon Bids Vietnam Spur War Effort", *New York Times*, November 1, 1953, p. 13.

[84] CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, *Vietnam: Some Neglected Aspects of the Historical Record*, Approved for release 1965/08/25, CIA-RDP67B00446R000300200015-1, accessed January 27, 2025, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP67B00446R000300200015-1.pdf.

The exhaustion of the battle of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Convention in 1954 exacerbated the concern of the American apparatus. However, Eisenhower opted to not deploy soldiers in Vietnam for an official military operation.[85] Instead, advisors and specialized personnel were covertly sent to assist and collaborate with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. This clandestine involvement came to light following the deaths of Major Dale Buis and Master Sergeant Chester Ovnand, killed in an insurgent attack 30 kilometers from Saigon.[86]

1.4 Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, and the U.S. in the Vietnam War (1963-1973)

The involvement of the United States gradually started to increase after the elections of John Kennedy[87]. Like Eisenhower, also JFK avoided to send regular troops in Vietnam, in its place, choosing to strengthen the military capabilities of the South Vietnamese Army. The number of advisors in Vietnam grew from 600 to 16.000.[88]

It's important to note that in the south the National Liberation Front (NLF), also called Viet Cong, was deeply involved in in guerrilla warfare and political subversion in South Vietnam. They aimed to undermine the South Vietnamese government through assassinations, sabotage, and ambushes, targeting officials, infrastructure, and military personnel. The NLF also organized rural populations, establishing a network of underground supporters, and implemented propaganda campaigns to gain local support.[89]

In this context, the *Strategic Hamlet Program*, launched under JFK's administration, aimed to counter communism in South Vietnam through modernization and development aid. It sought to isolate rural populations from Viet Cong influence by relocating them into fortified villages (*hamlets*), providing security, services, and economic support.[90]

However, the program failed due to forced relocations, corruption within the South Vietnamese government, poor military protection, and widespread local resentment. Instead of winning "hearts and minds", it fueled hostility and increased Viet Cong recruitment.

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[85] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, p. 145.

[86] F. LOGEVALL, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, ePub edition, Random House, New York, 2012, pp. 16, 832-833.

[87] John F. Kennedy (1917–1963), 35th President of the United States (1961–1963), is remembered for his leadership during pivotal moments of the Cold War, including the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) and the establishment of the Peace Corps. He championed civil rights and set the goal of landing a man on the Moon by the end of the 1960s. His presidency was tragically cut short by his assassination on November 22, 1963.

[88] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, p. 295.

[89] *Ibidem.*

[90] U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume III: Vietnam, January–August 1963*, Document 197, accessed February 5, 2025, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v03/d197.

Misjudging its effectiveness, the U.S. ultimately abandoned the program after Diem's fall in 1963, realizing it had strengthened, rather than weakened, communist influence.[91]

After the killing of Kennedy in 1963, the vice-president Lyndon Johnson[92] became president, further stretching his administration after the 1964 elections. During the Johnson presidency the American interference reaches a point of no return exacerbated by with the Diem coup[93] in South Vietnam and with the consequent Saigon government's instability. Yet, North Vietnamese officials, such as Giap, were cautious and deliberate in provoking the United States, a concern they shared with both the Soviet Union and China.[94]

As with any escalation of war, efforts are made to avoid the conflict, however, the threat of its outbreak remains ever-present. This risk became reality in August 1964, when Johnson cited false reports of North Vietnamese vessels attacking a U.S. naval ship in international waters in order to secure Congressional approval for escalating the war. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution[95] granted the president authority to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack" and prevent further aggression.[96]

In early 1965 American initiated retaliatory airstrikes in Laos and North Vietnam. As a reaction of that, the Vietcong attacked several US bases in South Vietnam.[97] At the end of the same year, American troops on the Vietnamese soil were 200.000.[98]

In the late 1960s, the Soviet Union and China were aligned in supporting Ho Chi Minh's government, though they diverged slightly on certain aspects. For the Soviet Union, the war was seen as an opportunity to bolster its image by standing alongside Vietnam. In contrast, China viewed its involvement as an imperative duty, driven by its sphere of influence and Mao's ambitions to challenge Soviet primacy within global socialism.[99] The first divergences emerged between the Soviet Union and China.

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[91] U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume III: Vietnam, January–August 1963*, Document 197, accessed February 5, 2025, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v03/d197; CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, *Strategic Hamlets Program*, intelligence report, declassified document, February 20, 1962, accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000242362.pdf.

[92] Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973), 36th President of the United States (1963–1969), is best known for his "Great Society" domestic programs, which expanded civil rights, Medicare, and anti-poverty initiatives.

[93] The Diệm coup, on November 1, 1963, marked the overthrow and assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm. Backed indirectly by the United States, which had grown frustrated with Diệm's authoritarian rule and failure to address Buddhist opposition, the coup led to political instability in South Vietnam, undermining its ability to resist communist. O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, p. 295-296.

[94] F. LOGEVALL, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, pp. 843-844.

[95] U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES, *Tonkin Gulf Resolution*, August 10, 1964, accessed January 27, 2025, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution.

[96] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, p. 298.

[97] F. LOGEVALL, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, p. 845.

[98] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, p. 298.

[99] *Ivi*, p. 299.

This is what emerges in a conversation between Zhou Enlai[100], Deng Xiaoping[101], and Ho Chi Minh in May 1965. Zhou Enlai accused the "Soviet revisionists" of pushing North Vietnam to engage in talks with the U.S., sidelining the National Liberation Front (NLF) and betraying its allies. Deng Xiaoping reinforced this view, stating that Soviet aid was primarily driven by their own strategic interests.[102] The Chinese appeared to be envious of their "big Russian brother", even going so far as to urge the Vietnamese government not to accept weapons from the Soviets.[103]

China saw the American involvement in Vietnam as a reflection of its own domestic class struggle, uniting its revolutionary commitment to victory with a sense of urgency over the looming American threat. For Mao Zedong, the fight against U.S. forces in Vietnam and the parallel launch of the Cultural Revolution[104] represented intertwined aspects of the same revolutionary agenda, one played out abroad and the other at home.[105]

For these all these reasons China became the most committed actor in helping, aiding and advising Vietnam, at least until 1970. In objective terms, China's aid to North Vietnam between 1955 and 1965 reached approximately half billion of U.S. dollars.[106] This effort further stretched in the next years until 1969: 20 billions of dollars and more than 300.000 military personnel were committed in supporting Ho Chi Minh's cause.[107]

Furthermore, Mao sent a total of 5 million tons of food, including 500,000 tons in 1966 alone, equivalent to 10% of Vietnam's total food production that year. The Chinese effort was

[100] Zhou Enlai (1898–1976), China's first Premier (1949–1976), was a key figure in modern Chinese history. Known for his diplomatic skill, he helped shape China's foreign policy, including the rapprochement with the United States in the 1970s, and played a stabilizing role during the Cultural Revolution.

[101] Deng Xiaoping, serving as General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee and Vice Premier of the PRC, faced significant political turmoil during the Cultural Revolution. He was purged in its early stages, rehabilitated in 1973, and purged again in 1976. Following Mao Zedong's death in September 1976, Deng reemerged as China's foremost leader, ultimately steering the country through transformative economic reforms.

[102] O. A. WESTAD, C. JIAN, S. TØNNESSON, N. V. TUNG, J. G. HERSHBERG, *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977*, Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington D.C., 1998, p. 85. During a conversation on May 17, 1965, in Beijing, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping discussed Soviet Vietnamese relations with Ho Chi Minh. Zhou stated: "[On Soviet-Vietnam relations] The Soviet revisionists want North Vietnam to talk with the US, to put the NLF aside and sell out its brothers". Deng Xiaoping added: "They [the Soviets] provide you some aid for their own purposes… In short, the Soviet aid is aimed at serving their strategy. If Vietnam finds it inconvenient to expose this fact, let us do it for you".

[103] *Ivi*, p. 87-88. Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, conversation in Beijing, 4 p.m., 9 October 1965.

[104] The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a socio-political movement launched by Mao Zedong in China to reassert his control and enforce communist ideology. Targeting perceived "counter-revolutionaries", it dismantled traditional culture, institutions, and intellectual life, leading to widespread persecution, violence, and economic disruption.

[105] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, pp. 175-176.

[106] O. A. WESTAD, C. JIAN, S. TØNNESSON, N. V. TUNG, J. G. HERSHBERG, *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977*, p. 15-16. The accounting of Chinese aid to the DRV is based on Russian estimates.

[107] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, p. 176.

also directed to build roads in North Vietnam, Laos, and southern China to strengthen military logistics and support the Ho Chi Minh Trail.[108]

Despite intense collaboration, the Chinese Government began to disagree with North Vietnam in 1968 when the latter sought diplomatic channels with the US. Zhou Enlai viewed this as a premature compromise that weakened North Vietnam's position and benefited the US.[109] These frictions reflected the differing ambitions of the two countries and their awareness of these underlying divergences.

Conversely, Vietnam was unsettled by the chaos of China's Cultural Revolution, particularly in Guangxi Province, where violent repression and instability led to tens of thousands of deaths. The turmoil highlighted China's unpredictability, further straining trust between the two nations.[110]

The Tet Offensive[111] further weakened the Sino-Vietnamese relationship by contradicting Mao Zedong's strategy of protracted people's war. While Mao emphasized gradual rural guerrilla warfare, Hanoi pursued a sudden urban offensive, signaling its independence from Chinese guidance. Beijing, cautious about premature urban attacks, saw this as a rejection of its strategic advice. Meanwhile, Hanoi's accusations of inadequate Chinese aid and a desire to prolong the conflict extended the fracture.[112]

The death of Ho Chi Minh in September 1969 disrupted the diplomatic equidistance between China and Soviet Union.[113] Le Duan[114] toke his place. The new leader of the DRV was more ideologically rigid than Ho Chi Minh and less pragmatic in his approach to leadership. While

[108] O. A. WESTAD, C. JIAN, S. TØNNESSON, N. V. TUNG, J. G. HERSHBERG, *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977*, pp. 84-85. The conversation took place on May 16, 1965, in Changsha (Hunan) between Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh. During this meeting, Ho requested Chinese assistance in building roads to support military logistics in North Vietnam, Laos, and beyond. Mao agreed, recognizing the strategic importance of these routes for future large-scale battles and regional influence.

[109] *Ivi*, pp. 126-127. Conversation between Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, April 19, 1968.

[110] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, p. 178. The militarization of Guangxi, combined with brutal repression of dissent by local authorities, resulted in devastating human losses, with deaths estimated between 83,000 and 300,000. Reports of extreme acts such as cannibalism and a high number of suicides highlighted the chaos and instability.

[111] The Tet Offensive, launched on January 30, 1968, was a coordinated series of attacks by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces on South Vietnam during the Vietnamese New Year (Tet). Although militarily costly for the North, it shocked the United States with its scale and undermined American public support for the Vietnam War, marking a turning point in the conflict.

[112] Q. ZHAI, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2000, pp. 176-180. In reaction to this disagreements, in 1969, China's military aid to North Vietnam sharply declined. Beijing provided significantly fewer rifles, artillery pieces, and ammunition compared to 1968.

[113] *Ivi*, p. 174.

[114] Lê Duẩn (1907–1986) was a key leader of North Vietnam and later unified Vietnam. As General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam from 1960 until his death in 1986, he played a decisive role in escalating the Vietnam War against the United States and South Vietnam. After reunification in 1975, he led the country through socialist economic policies.

Ho skillfully balanced diplomacy between China and the USSR to maximize Vietnam's benefits,[115] Le Duan, already in the early '70s, began to view China with growing suspicion.[116]

The Chinese strict ideological visions, mostly supported by Mao, that fueled the Cultural Revolution similarly help us to explain the China-Russian detachment. Mao's emphasis on permanent revolution and opposition to "revisionism" clashed with the Soviet Union's focus on peaceful coexistence with the U.S. and its more pragmatic policies. China viewed Soviet actions as betrayals of Marxist-Leninist principles, while Moscow saw Beijing's radicalism as reckless.[117]

By the late 1960s, China's primary focus shifted to the perceived threat posed by the Soviet Union. The Brezhnev Doctrine of "limited sovereignty" granted the USSR the authority to intervene in any socialist country where socialism was considered "at risk". Even being preliminary for the "Prague Spring", Beijing perceived the Soviet doctrine a threat flexible to any Socialist country, China itself.[118] The result of this was an inducted openness of the Chinese Government to find a compromise to end the war during the Paris peace talks indirectly, since it did not take part at the negotiations.[119] The two "comrade" countries even end up clashing in 1969, contending the island of Zhenbao (Damansky) in the Ussuri River.[120]

The new Nixon administration, recognizing the strategic decoupling, viewed it as a pivotal opportunity to implement a two-phase diplomatic strategy. First, it aimed to bring China closer to Washington in the Cold War context, effectively isolating the Soviet Union. Second, an opening to China could help ease American public opinion on the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam, as promised during the electoral campaign.[121] To capture this approach, one must turn to the words of Henry Kissinger[122], the real architect of Nixon's foreign policy:

> He (President Nixon) sought to use the opening to China to demonstrate to the American public that, even in the midst of a debilitating war, the United States was in a position to bring about a design for long-term peace. He and his associates strove to reestablish contact with one-fifth of the world's population to place in context and ease the pain of an inevitably imperfect withdrawal from a corner of Southeast Asia.[123]

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[115] Q. ZHAI, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, pp. 90-91

[116] *Ivi*, pp. 213-214.

[117] *Ivi*, pp. 148-149.

[118] *Ivi*, p. 174. Chinese Government firmly condemned the "Prague Spring".

[119] *Ibidem*. The Chinese Government indirectly sought to influence the Paris peace talks (1968–1971) by refraining from direct involvement. Beijing opposed Soviet participation, viewing it as a self-serving tactic to leverage the Vietnam conflict in negotiations with the United States, as Zhou Enlai emphasized.

[120] *Ivi*, p. 181.

[121] "Nixon Promises End to the War", *New York Times*, August 8, 1968, p. 1, 21.

[122] Henry Kissinger, initially serving as National Security Advisor (1969–1975) and later as U.S. Secretary of State (1973–1977), played a crucial role in shaping U.S. foreign policy.

[123] H. KISSINGER, *On China*, ePub edition, Penguin Press, New York, 2011, p. 196.

However, the Cambodia crisis in 1970 further complicated both the military and diplomatic aspects of American involvement. The deposition of Prince Sihanouk[124] was unfavorable to the DRV, as Cambodia, under his leadership, had been aiding the Viet Cong and hosting several North Vietnamese bases on its territory.[125] With Lon Nol's[126] rise to power, Cambodia shifted towards a pro-American stance, disrupting the vital supply lines and sanctuaries used by North Vietnamese forces. This forced Hanoi to review its strategy, as the loss of these bases posed significant logistical challenges to its operations in South Vietnam.[127]

At the same time, the coup intensified regional rivalries. China, aiming to maintain its influence in Indochina and counter Soviet expansion, supported Sihanouk in exile while cautiously navigating its relationship with Lon Nol. Zhou Enlai's diplomacy attempted to both exploit Sihanouk's popular appeal and explore possible cooperation with Lon Nol. Hanoi, even being threatened by Lon Nol regime, saw an opportunity to mobilize Cambodian revolutionary forces under the Khmer Rouge[128], aligning them with its broader anti-American objectives.[129]

The American invasion of Cambodia in May 1970 further escalated the situation. Washington's decision to deploy ground troops outside South Vietnam not only strained the already tenuous Sino-American rapprochement but also stimulated regional opposition to U.S. intervention. For China, the invasion was a propaganda opportunity to reinforce its revolutionary cover while challenging Soviet inaction in the region.[130]

China resumed the diplomatic relations with the United States only after the withdraw from Cambodia in the late 1970. Simultaneously, Beijing was trying to bring the DRV to negotiation table with the US.[131]

China's strategy was a precarious balancing act, particularly in terms of appearances, given the rigid ideological framework of Maoist communism. This paradox is particularly relevant to analyze, as it reveals how ideological constructs can sometimes clash with their own

[124] Prince Norodom Sihanouk (1922–2012), a central figure in Cambodian politics, ruled as head of state until his overthrow in 1970. From 1970 to 1975, he allied with the Khmer Rouge during the civil war, maintaining his role as a symbol of Cambodian nationalism despite his complex relationship with the group.

[125] Q. ZHAI, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, pp. 182-184.

[126] Lon Nol (1913–1985), a Cambodian general and politician, came to power in 1970 through a U.S.-backed coup, overthrowing Prince Sihanouk. He led the Khmer Republic (1970–1975) until its collapse under the Khmer Rouge offensive in 1975.

[127] Q. ZHAI, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, pp. 182-185.

[128] The Khmer Rouge, a communist movement led by Pol Pot, rose to prominence during the Cambodian Civil War (1970–1975). After seizing power in 1975, they ruled Cambodia until 1979, implementing radical reforms to create a classless agrarian society.

[129] Q. ZHAI, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, pp. 182-187.

[130] *Ivi*, pp. 185-192.

[131] *Ivi*, pp. 193-194

principles. Communism, ostensibly rooted in international solidarity, was now being weighed against national security interests and geopolitical ambitions, gradually shifting from an ideological absolute to a strategic tool.

During the Cold War, this divergence repeatedly manifested in the evolving interpretations of communism, both within the same individual national communist system and, even more frequently, between different countries. As time passed, ideological unity often gave way to strategic and political recalibrations, reflecting shifting national interests and power dynamics. China's shift in the late '60s was one of the most important of the 20th century, and it had to be carried out step by step, gradually over time.

A first small move towards Washington was made in April 1971 with the invitation of the American team of ping-pong in China. Even though it took place in alternative venues rather than traditional ones, the event had a significant impact on relations between the two countries.[132]

Thanks to Kissinger's secret trips in China during July 1971 and his relationship with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, the “ping-pong diplomacy” strategy evolved over two years, culminating in Nixon’s visit to China in February 1972, the first American president to do that since Korean War.[133] After the meeting, to reassure the DRV, which was increasingly skeptical of its alliance with China, Beijing increased aid in 1973 compared to the previous year, despite knowing that the conflict was about to end.[134]

The emergent, but still fragile, alliance annulled the American strategy until that point, directed to isolate China and prevent the “domino effect” in South-East Asia. This, together with the antecedent promise of Nixon to withdraw American troops, accelerated the process.[135] In August 1972, Nixon decided to decrease American units to 29.000.[136]

"Vietnamization" was central to the U.S. withdrawal strategy. Nixon aimed to continue financing and supplying weapons while strengthening the South Vietnamese Army to maintain independence and keep the communists away.[137]

The natural conclusion of this were the Paris Agreements in early 1973 which sought to establish a ceasefire, ensure the withdrawal of U.S. troops, and guarantee South Vietnam’s right

[132] H. KISSINGER, *On China*, pp. 209-210.
[133] *Ivi*, pp. 210-215.
[134] Q. ZHAI, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, p. 136.
[135] *Ivi*, pp. 201-202
[136] U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VIII: Vietnam, January–October 1972, Document 253, accessed January 27, 2025, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v08/d253.
[137] Q. ZHAI, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, pp. 181.

to self-determination through democratic elections. The agreement also mandated the exchange of prisoners and prohibited further foreign military involvement.[138]

However, Vietnamization and the self-determination outlined in the agreements were not enough. In December 1974, the DRV invaded South Vietnam, and with the support of the Viet Cong, captured Saigon on April 30, 1975, later renamed Ho Chi Minh City.[139] After 21 years from Dien Bien Phu Vietnam—with the new name of the "Socialist Republic of Vietnam" (SRV)— was finally unified under an only government.

This chapter has traced Vietnam's long and turbulent road to independence, shaped by colonial rule, ideological battles, and the power struggles of the Cold War. From French domination to Ho Chi Minh's communist revolution, and finally to American intervention, Vietnam became more than just a battleground—it was a symbol of global tensions, where major powers tested their influence.

One of the key elements is the constant push-and-pull between national self-determination and foreign interference. Ho Chi Minh and his allies skillfully leveraged the rivalry between China and the Soviet Union to secure military and logistical support, but this support came at a price. Vietnam had to walk a fine line, ensuring its survival without becoming just another pawn in the geopolitical chessboard of the era. What emerges is not just a story of war, but of diplomacy, resilience, and strategic maneuvering.

Another crucial point is how the war not only freed Vietnam from colonial rule but also shaped its identity as an independent communist state. The country's transformation wasn't just about military victories—it was about reshaping its economy, society, and diplomatic stance in the wake of decades of conflict. However, alliances with China and the Soviet Union brought their own complications, laying the groundwork for future tensions, including Vietnam's eventual fallout with China in 1979—the core episode of this dissertation.

But victory in 1975 wasn't the end of the story: it was the beginning of new challenges. A newly unified Vietnam now had to rebuild, consolidate power, and navigate a shifting global landscape as the Cold War continued to reshape international politics. The next part will explore this post-war period, jumping into Vietnamese approach in tackling internal struggles, regional conflicts, and its evolving place on the world stage.

[138] O. A. WESTAD, *The Cold War: A World History*, pp. 381-382.
[139] *Ivi*, pp. 439-441.

Chapter 2

2. The Path of China and Vietnam to Conflict (1975-1979)

2.1 *Vietnam's war aftermath in the evolving global scenario*

In an era of profound geopolitical transformation, Vietnam enters a turbulent new phase. The dramatic fall of Saigon paved the way for a contentious unification process that culminated in 1976 with the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.[140] The subsequent years, leading up to February 17, 1979—the day the Sino-Vietnamese War officially erupted—witnessed Vietnam boldly recalibrating its diplomatic and economic strategies in response to shifting global power dynamics. The global system grew increasingly complex, marked by emerging multipolar dynamics. China's economic ascent paralleled the rise of an assertive force acting independently of its historical Soviet ally.

This chapter delves into the intricate process of normalization and the evolving relationships between Vietnam and the major global powers, highlighting how these changes not only redefined Vietnam's internal landscape but also its external posture on the international stage. The key developments in Cambodia's political trajectory will be integrated, contextualizing the regional shifts. The role Cambodia it's central to the context of what historians refer to as the "Third Indochina War". Without understanding Pol Pot's regime and its rise to power, this dissertation cannot fully address the research questions.

Finally, we will try to anticipate the stimuluses bringing Beijing in acting fiercely against the southern neighbor. This will consist in connecting the dots, especially taking the Chinese perspective central, since initiator of the conflict. While these few years might seem less eventful compared to the preceding three decades of unrelenting struggle in Vietnam, they witnessed significant developments, particularly at the international level. As new balances of power and emerging interests began to reshape the region, this chapter aims to shed light on those dynamics and their impact on the conflict to come.

In accord with the Paris Agreements of 1973, Article 22, the United States had to start a "new, equal and mutually beneficial relationship between the United States and the Democratic

[140] "2 Parts of Vietnam Officially Reunited", *New York Times*, July 3, 1976, pp. 1, 5.

Republic of Vietnam" leading to the normalization of the relations between the two nations and the official recognition of the Hanoi government.[141]

One of the primary difficulties was Vietnam's insistence on the implementation of Article 21, which stated that the United States would have contributed to the postwar reconstruction of Vietnam and broader Indochina. Hanoi viewed this as a moral and political commitment to repairing the devastation caused by years of conflict. In exchange, Vietnam was willing to observe the Article 8b, which required cooperation in locating and repatriating the remains of U.S. military personnel listed as missing in action (MIA) or killed in action but not recovered (KIA/BNR). The U.S. Department of Defense had identified 965 missing servicemen and another 1,100 declared dead but never recovered.[142]

Despite these provisions to be implemented, the two sides struggled to find common ground. Vietnam saw reconstruction aid as a necessary step in healing the wounds of war, while the United States was primarily concerned with the fate of its missing soldiers. This deadlock delayed diplomatic normalization, demonstrating that, even after the military conflict ended, its legacy continued to shape U.S.-Vietnam relations in the early postwar era.[143]

In addition to that, the reparation was seen from the American government as a smack on the appearances of the United States, still involved in a major confrontation with the Soviet Union and consequently aware of the public image of itself in front of the rest of the world.[144] The pretext for this American defection of the Paris Agreements was the violation of the ceasefire by the DRV.[145] These two articles imposed a ceasefire in Vietnam, halting U.S. military operations and ensuring the removal of mines. They mandated troop withdrawals, territorial demarcation, and banned offensive actions, terrorism, and reprisals, aiming to create a stable and lasting peace.[146]

In this regard, North Vietnamese forces continued military operations, reinforced troops, and launched offensives despite the ceasefire. Both Saigon and Hanoi ignored bans on hostile acts,

[141] C. MENÉTREY-MONCHAU, "The Changing Post-War US Strategy in Indochina", in O. A. WESTAD, S. QUINN-JUDGE (eds.), *The Third Indochina War: Conflict Between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2006, p. 65.

[142] *Ibidem*.

[143] C. MENÉTREY-MONCHAU, "The Changing Post-War US Strategy in Indochina", pp. 65-66.

[144] *Ivi*, p. 66.

[145] *Ibidem*.

[146] UNITED NATIONS, *Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet-Nam*, Paris, January 27, 1973, *United Nations Treaty Series*, vol. 935, No. I-13295, accessed February 1, 2025, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20935/volume-935-I-13295-English.pdf, pp. 6-7.

leading to escalating conflict.[147] The weak enforcement of the binding provisions in the Paris Agreement was the ultimate reason for the early fall of Saigon in 1975. From the American point of view, the Paris Agreement's aim of lasting peace could have been the legal barrier for the impeding the unification of Vietnam.

The extension of the existing embargo to South Vietnam and Cambodia in May 1975 symbolized the United States' refusal to negotiate with the communists. In contrast, Hanoi, particularly through statements[148] made by its Prime Minister Pham Van Dong[149], sought to present itself as open to dialogue. The normalization, both internal and external, was the first focus of Vietnam at this point.

This was not easy to reach. In July 1975, within animated debates over North and South Vietnam's separate UN membership applications, South Korea reactivated its quiescent UN bid from 1949. Although not a UN member at the time, South Korea's expected rejection provided Washington with a diplomatic pretext. By linking the Vietnamese applications to South Korea's, the U.S. justified vetoing the admissions, calling for "universalism".[150]

Vietnam in following months tried to mitigate the American stance through the release of the MIAs, the main public purpose of American approach. Yet, this was not sufficient since another request for UN admission was vetoed in November 1976.[151] The Ford administration needed to break away from the past, particularly from the legacy of Nixon's withdrawal from Vietnam, still a painful wound for the American public, especially in an election year.[152]

Nixon's scheme in Vietnam was not merely an isolated occurrence but rather a symbol of the failure of traditional diplomacy. In essence, it marked a turning point that prompted the Carter administration to adopt a new strategy. Growing domestic criticism of the outdated approach further accelerated this shift. Meanwhile, in Moscow, Brezhnev[153] viewed Third World

[147] W. L. STEARMAN, *Memorandum for Mr. Kissinger: Communist Violations of the Cease-fire Agreement*, National Security Council, May 12, 1973, declassified document, LOC-HAK-559-18-1-1, accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/LOC-HAK-559-18-1-1.pdf.

[148] C. MENÉTREY-MONCHAU, "The Changing Post-War US Strategy in Indochina", p. 68. On May 7, 1975, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong conveyed a message to Washington via Sweden, expressing Hanoi's willingness to establish good relations with the U.S., contingent on economic aid as a means to "bind up the wounds of war". Hanoi even suggested the possibility of a small U.S. mission in Saigon under the new government. On June 3, Dong reiterated this stance in a National Assembly speech, emphasizing that normalization depended on Washington's commitment to Article 21 of the Paris Peace Accords,

[149] Phạm Văn Đồng (1906–2000) was a key Vietnamese communist leader and served as Prime Minister of North Vietnam (1955–1976) and later of reunified Vietnam (1976–1987). A close ally of Hồ Chí Minh, he played a crucial role in diplomatic and military strategies during the Vietnam War and in post-war reconstruction efforts.

[150] C. MENÉTREY-MONCHAU, "The Changing Post-War US Strategy in Indochina", p. 69.

[151] *Ivi*, p. 69-71.

[152] *Ivi*, p. 70-71.

[153] Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982) was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1982. His leadership was marked by the policy of détente with the West, military interventions in Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979), and economic stagnation. In Asia, Brezhnev supported Vietnam

conflicts as zero-sum contests, where any gain for one side directly represented a loss for the other.[154] The ultimate result was increased tensions and the abandonment of détente between the two superpowers, further complicated by China's emergence as a third player in the geopolitical landscape.

The issue of MIAs remained central to any potential reproachment in relations. For the United States, the fate of missing servicemen was not only a humanitarian concern but also a politically sensitive matter that shaped public opinion. Vietnam's efforts to use MIA repatriation as a diplomatic tool reflected an understanding that this was one of the few areas where common ground could be found.[155]

Only with Carter[156] in 1977 things changed. The new president's agenda included the ambitious aim to normalize relations with Vietnam. In March 1977, the Woodcock delegation secured Vietnam's cooperation in searching for MIAs and returning remains, initially fostering hope for progress. However, Hanoi continued to insist on U.S. aid, citing a past promise from Nixon.[157] When this commitment was made public, it provoked strong congressional opposition rather than support.[158]

As talks continued, the issue of aid remained a major obstacle. While the U.S. allowed Vietnam's UN admission in September, negotiations in Paris stalled over Hanoi's demands. By December, Vietnam suggested normalizing first and discussing aid later, but the U.S., under pressure from Congress, hardened its stance. Carter's administration ultimately left the decision to Vietnam, refusing to commit to aid and halting further progress.[159]

Part of what was previously discussed can help us understand the motives behind Hanoi's decision to leverage the MIA issue, not only as a means to stabilize diplomatic relations with Washington but also as a strategy to secure economic aid. The latter is essential for figuring

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during the Vietnam War and its conflicts with China, solidifying Soviet-Vietnamese ties during the Sino-Soviet split.

[154] O. A. WESTAD, "Introduction: From War to Peace to War in Indochina", in O. A. WESTAD, S. QUINN-JUDGE (eds.), *The Third Indochina War: Conflict Between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972–79*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2006, pp. 7-8.

[155] C. MENÉTREY-MONCHAU, "The Changing Post-War US Strategy in Indochina", pp. 65-71.

[156] Jimmy Carter (1924-2024), 39th U.S. President (1977–1981), prioritized human rights in foreign policy and energy reform. He supervised the Camp David Accords (1978) but faced setbacks with the 1979 Iranian Revolution and hostage crisis, weakening his presidency.

[157] C. MENÉTREY-MONCHAU, "The Changing Post-War US Strategy in Indochina", p. 74. Nixon's aid promise was outlined in a secret letter to Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong on February 1, 1973. He pledged $3.25 billion in reconstruction aid over five years, plus $1 to $1.5 billion in food and commodities, as part of the Paris Peace Accords. However, Congress later refused to approve the funds, citing alleged Vietnamese violations of the agreement. When the letter was revealed in 1977, instead of pressuring the U.S. to honor the commitment, it provoked strong congressional opposition, leading to amendments blocking all aid to Vietnam.

[158] *Ibidem*.

[159] C. MENÉTREY-MONCHAU, "The Changing Post-War US Strategy in Indochina", p. 75

out the rationale behind the Vietnamese government's actions in the critical years following the end of the Second Indochina War. While economic planning—particularly a five-year plan inspired by the Soviet model—was a key component of Hanoi's strategy, the economic results were not encouraging.[160]

Similar to its aims with the U.S., Vietnam sought economic aid from both China and the Soviet Union. The underlying motivation for these two powers was to emphasize their influence by having played a significant role in Vietnam's unification, emphasizing the symbolic and strategic importance of their support.[161] In substance, the Vietnamese Government reproduced the same strategy adopted during the war against the Americans: try to maximize its benefits from the international competition between China and URSS.

However, China response was not as expected. «Today, you are not the poorest under heaven. We are the poorest. We have a population of 800 million. Our leadership is now facing a crisis»[162] were the words with which Mao signaled a rupture in Beijing's aid to Hanoi on September 24, 1975.

China apparently refused to raise the stakes in aiding Vietnam, in particular given the amount of Vietnam. Hanoi requested 1 billion RMB in material aid from Beijing, including steel, fuel, fertilizer, coal, cement, vehicles, and staple foods. However, to Hanoi's deep disappointment, China only offered a 100 million RMB loan (around $50 million), limited to purchasing Chinese goods.[163] Furthermore, the presence of Chinese specialist advisors in Vietnam, who assisted in implementing the five-year plan, dropped significantly from 39% in 1975 to just 3% in 1977.[164]

On contrast, Vietnam successfully managed to secure aids totaling 1.73 billion rubles in long-term loans from eight socialist countries, with nearly half (844 million rubles) coming from Moscow.[165] Still, these aids combined were far inferior respect to the war aids from Beijing,[166] making tougher the economic stability of Vietnam.

The insufficiency of aid in post-war reconstruction serves both as the *explanans* and the *explanandum* in understanding Vietnam's attempt normalize relations with the U.S. after the

[160] K. PATH, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking During the Third Indochina War*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison/London, 2020, p. 19.
[161] *Ivi*, p. 23.
[162] O. A. WESTAD, C. JIAN, S. TØNNESSON, N. V. TUNG, J. G. HERSHBERG, *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977*, p. 192.
[163] K. PATH, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking During the Third Indochina War*, p. 24.
[164] *Ivi*, p. 28.
[165] *Ivi*, p. 25.
[166] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, p. 176; *Ibidem*, p. 25.

war. The increasingly divided socialist bloc failed to provide Hanoi with the necessary resources for economic survival.

In this intricate crisis, it is worth noting that Beijing contested South Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel Islands, located between Da Nang and Hainan Island, by attacking its small garrison and securing control in early 1974. China justified the move as self-defense, though Hanoi later expressed discontent. In April 1975, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Vietnam occupied parts of the Spratly Islands, an archipelago 650km from Ho Chi Minh City, openly challenging Beijing's territorial claims, though China initially did not respond.[167]

Moreover, the Vietnamese orientation towards Moscow became increasingly stronger. In late 1976, in the context of the Fourth Party congress in Hanoi, the member of the Politburo Hoang Van Hoan was pushed out of power alongside with other important political figures. They all were part of the pro-Beijing faction and critical to the Soviet Union.[168]

The division between Vietnam and the USSR on one side and China on the other was further exacerbated by the new paradigm introduced by Deng Xiaoping. His leadership provided a framework for understanding the new course cautiously initiated by Mao and Zhou Enlai in 1971, which he later continued and implemented with greater intensity. Unlike his predecessors, who were deeply engaged in exhausting internal ideological battles, Deng's primary goal was to strategically position China for its rise in the international order. Aware of the irreparably damaged relationship with Russia, he sought to achieve this through a decisive opening toward the United States.[169]

Deng recognized, both strategically and ideologically, that communist internationalism was an obstacle to China's rise and that Soviet-style communism bore imperialist traits. As a result, China, increasingly anti-Soviet and aligned with the United States, found itself on a collision course with a Soviet-backed Vietnam. Additionally, given China's historical imperial ambitions, as highlighted earlier in this dissertation, Vietnam was perceived as an obstacle to Beijing's ambitions of maintaining its sphere of influence in Indochina.

This transformation can be better understood by considering the deaths of key communist leaders—Stalin in 1953, Ho Chi Minh in 1969, and Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in 1977—which marked the definitive end of revolutionary communist internationalism. The dynamics within the Moscow-Beijing-Hanoi triangle also evolved, no longer shaped by the need to

[167] S. J. HOOD, *Dragons Entangled: Indo-China and the China-Vietnam War*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2015, pp. 119-125.
[168] *Ivi*, p. 36.
[169] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2007, p. 34.

counter capitalist and imperialist interference in Asian affairs. Instead, the new course emerged primarily from the shifting balance of power in Asia, followed by the strategic realignments led by figures like Deng Xiaoping.[170]

2.2 The road to radicalization in Cambodia and the anti-Vietnamese stance of Pol Pot

This great mutation also involved minor actors such as Cambodia, which trajectory after 1973 is crucial to comprehend its key role in shaping Sino-Vietnamese relations in the post-unification era. While initially aligned in their anti-American struggle, the evolving dynamics in Cambodia enlarged the fractures between Hanoi and Beijing, turning the country into a central battleground for their competing regional ambitions.

The previous chapter outlined very briefly how the Cambodian crisis of 1970, triggered by the coup against Prince Sihanouk, disrupted North Vietnam's supply lines and forced Hanoi to adapt its strategy, highlighting how the U.S. invasion of Cambodia and China's support for Sihanouk reshaped regional dynamics (see pp. 26-27). How did Cambodia's political evolution unfold, and what impact did it have on the region's broader conflict? This section seeks to answer that question, highlighting the key developments that shaped Cambodia's role in the geopolitical dynamics of Southeast Asia.

From 1970 onward, backed from Beijing and Hanoi, Sihanouk was appointed head of FUNK (Front Uni National du Kampuchea) due to his widespread popularity in Cambodia. Established to oppose Lon Nol's regime, FUNK served multiple strategic interests: it facilitated North Vietnamese infiltration via the Ho Chi Minh Trail while aligning with China's broader objective of countering U.S. influence and preventing Vietnamese dominance in Indochina.[171]

Alongside FUNK, the GRUNK (Gouvernement Royal d'Union Nationale du Kampuchéa) was formed as Cambodia's government-in-exile (1970-1975). This entity was the government of the FUNK controlled areas and was based in Beijing due the exile of Prince Sihanouk. Both the political units included the Khmers Rouges led by Pol Pot.[172]

This communist movement was inspired by Maoism, taking the more radical aspects. The Khmers Rouges sought to prove their superiority over Vietnam, despite their military disadvantage, by implementing an ultra-radical social transformation and rejecting external

[170] C. E. GOSCHA, "Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism", in O. A. WESTAD, S. QUINN-JUDGE (eds.), *The Third Indochina War: Conflict Between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, pp. 152-156.

[171] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999, p. 40.

[172] *Ivi*, pp. 50-53

influence.[173] This extreme nationalism, verging on xenophobia, stems in part from Maoism's concept of the "paper tiger", [174] which was deeply ingrained in Pol Pot's ideology—this time directed against Vietnam.

Nevertheless, this ideology was mitigated to pursue a short-term strategy. Hanoi would have been essential in order to obtain military assistance and Sihanouk, who had been fighting during his regime the Khmers Rouges, had to be the public figure useful in the recruiting appeals for the insurgency, especially given the link between the exiled prince and Beijing.[175] This "alliance" took the form of a pragmatic agreement between Sihanouk, North Vietnam, and Pol Pot, each pursuing their own objectives. However, strong resentment and fundamental incompatibilities between the parties persisted.

By 1973, after strengthening their influence within FUNK, the Khmers Rouges began to radicalize the revolutionary front and distance it from Sihanouk's influence. Hanoi asymmetrically supported the role of the Cambodian prince, being aware of his weight, particularly in mobilizing the Cambodian peasantry population.[176] Pol Pot lacked this logical approach, as he was an ideological purist who viewed Sihanouk as an obstacle to his vision of an ultra-Maoist agrarian revolution.[177]

Moreover, the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 marked a decisive rupture in Vietnamese-Khmer Rouge relations. Prioritizing Vietnam's unification and regional influence, Hanoi accepted the accords as part of a broader strategy to end U.S. involvement in Indochina. In contrast, the Khmer Rouge rejected any form of negotiation, insisting on fighting to the end.[178] This stance was reinforced by Pol Pot's ability to exploit anti-American rhetoric, particularly as U.S. bombing of Cambodian territory continued until August 1973. The ongoing airstrikes bolstered Khmer Rouge recruitment, strengthening their ranks and legitimacy.[179]

The struggle against Lon Nol ended on April 17, 1975, when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmers Rouges, marking their final victory over Lon Nol's government. Already during the capture of

[173] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 17. The author labels this ideological framework as "hyper-Maoism".

[174] Mao Zedong famously referred to imperialism and U.S. power as a "paper tiger", a term emphasizing their perceived weakness despite outward strength. In The Little Red Book (1964), he stated: "All reactionaries are paper tigers… In appearance, the reactionaries are terrifying, but in reality, they are not so powerful". This concept shaped Chinese propaganda, portraying foreign powers that attempt to interfere in China's affairs.

[175] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, pp. 50-52.

[176] *Ivi*, pp. 53-54

[177] *Ivi*, p. 54.

[178] C. E. GOSCHA, "Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism", pp. 169-171.

[179] B. KIERNAN, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 1998, pp. 19-23.

the capital and the days that followed, the Khmer Rouge's brutal methods became evident. In the immediate aftermath of Phnom Penh's fall, mass purges unfolded, resulting in around 20,000 deaths from executions and forced evacuations. The first targets included Lon Nol's officers, government officials, police, intellectuals, and civilians who resisted evacuation. Executions were carried out on the streets, in makeshift detention centers, and along evacuation routes, setting the stage for the regime's reign of terror.[180]

In the following months after having seized Phnom Penh, the Khmers Rouges launched a radical transformation of Cambodia's economy and society, eradicating private property and commerce. Money was abolished, making any exchange outside the state-controlled system impossible. Cities were emptied, turning into ghostly, abandoned landscapes, with government buildings occupied solely by revolutionary forces.[181]

The entire urban population was forcibly deported to the countryside, where they were compelled to work in collectivized agricultural cooperatives. Forced labor became the norm, 12 to 16 hours a day in the fields, with no proper tools, minimal food rations, and no medical care.[182] Driven by an ideology of "forced autarky", the regime isolated Cambodia from the outside world, imposing a primitive agricultural model. Personal possessions and individual autonomy were eliminated. The state controlled every aspect of life, and even the slightest complaint or disobedience could result in immediate execution.[183]

One final obstacle was Sihanouk, who still held a formal but powerless position of authority. In April 1976, he was forced to resign, leaving the Khmer Rouge as the sole ruling force of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK). Khieu Samphan[184] replaced Sihanouk as head of state, and Pol Pot was appointed prime minister.[185] However, the personalization of power within the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) and the government was still incomplete. At the end of 1976 two of his political opponent, Keo Moni and Nong Suon, inside the CPK were arrested.

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[180] B. KIERNAN, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, pp. 31-49.

[181] *Ivi*, pp. 96-99.

[182] *Ivi*, pp. 98, 167-169. Some of the information in the book is based on interviews conducted between 1979 and 1980 with refugees and survivors, including former labor camp prisoners.

[183] *Ivi*, pp. 167-168. "They (the peasants) were organized into massive labor gangs, but were increasingly assigned individual rather than collective daily targets. While pro- claiming a communal ideal, the CPKatomized its citizens to assure maximum social control. It succeeded".

[184] Khieu Samphan (1931) was a key leader of the Khmer Rouge and served as head of state of Democratic Kampuchea (1976–1979). A close ally of Pol Pot, he played a central role in the regime's radical policies, which led to mass atrocities. Convicted of genocide in 2018, he remains one of the last surviving senior Khmer Rouge figures.

[185] G. EVANS, K. ROWLEY, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon*, Verso Editions, London, 1984, 104-105; KIERNAN, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, p. 327.

From this point onwards, the purges followed without interruption. Cadres, soldiers, civilians, and "intellectuals" were killed periodically in mass, accounting 100.000 executions.[186]

A crucial aspect to consider in the context of the Cambodian genocide, particularly for the purpose of our research, is the role of racial motivations in executions and killings. Many acts of violence were not solely driven by political or ideological factors but were also rooted in racial animosity. This further underscores the innate hostility that Cambodians harbored toward the Vietnamese, highlighting that the Khmer Rouge's actions were not only a means of consolidating power but also a manifestation of entrenched ethnic tensions.

This racially motivated violence escalated systematically under the Khmer Rouge regime. In 1975, approximately 150,000 Vietnamese were expelled from Cambodia, but many were massacred along the way before reaching Vietnam. By 1976, those who remained were forbidden from leaving the country, marking the beginning of large-scale executions. By 1977, the regime had intensified its policies, indiscriminately killing anyone of Vietnamese descent, even those who simply spoke Khmer with a Vietnamese accent.[187]

On April 1, 1977, the central government issued an explicit order to arrest and execute all ethnic Vietnamese, as well as Khmer individuals married to Vietnamese spouses. This led to systematic mass killings, including the Kompong Chhnang massacre in May 1977, where approximately 420 Vietnamese men, women, and children were executed. In some regions, the brutality reached extreme levels: Khmer individuals married to Vietnamese were forced to kill their spouses, with entire families executed if they refused.[188]

Was this massacre only motivated only by a political ideology or in certain aspects could be explained by other means? Understanding this dynamic requires acknowledging the centuries-old rivalry between Cambodia and Vietnam. In particular, a pamphlet called "*Livre noir: faits et preuves des actes d'agression et d'annexion du Vietnam contre le Kampuchéa*"[189] was released in September 1978 by the Khmer Rouge government to report the aggressive attitude of Hanoi.

This was a propaganda document accusing Vietnam of aggression, annexation, and political interference in Cambodia. It framed Vietnam as a historical expansionist power, citing its

[186] G. EVANS, K. ROWLEY, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon*, Verso Editions, London, 1984, pp. 108-109.

[187] B. KIERNAN, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, pp. 296-298.

[188] *Ibidem*.

[189] *Black Paper: Facts and Evidences of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam Against Kampuchea*, Department of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea, 1978. This English version (*Black Paper*) is a literal and shortened translation of the *Livre Noir*, omitting certain sections, particularly references to Cambodian dissidents in Vietnam.

conquest of Champa and Kampuchea Krom of the 15th century, and claimed Hanoi had infiltrated Cambodia's communist movement to establish a puppet leadership exploiting the revolutionary spirit of the years.[190]

The document portrayed Vietnam's role in the Indochina Wars as exploitative, alleging that Hanoi manipulated Cambodian politics, orchestrated Lon Nol's rise, and sought control after 1975 through border attacks and Soviet-backed expansionism.[191] It compared Vietnam to Hitler, presenting Cambodia's struggle as essential to stopping Vietnamese dominance in Southeast Asia.[192]

It's fundamental to make clear that the Black Paper served as a propaganda tool to justify the Khmer Rouge's war against Vietnam, portraying Pol Pot's regime as the defender of Cambodian independence. It also engaged in historical revisionism, selectively distorting facts to depict Vietnam as a continuous oppressor, while ignoring China's role in shaping the region's geopolitics.

However, as evidenced by the events of the First and Second Indochina Wars, Hanoi consistently maintained a dominant position within the revolutionary wave that swept across Indochina. This is further reinforced by the fact that Ho Chi Minh's first established party, the Communist Party of Indochina, was originally conceived to represent the entire peninsula,[193] but reasonably the scope changed with the times.

During the Second Indochina War, North Vietnam's logistic necessity dictated its engagement in Cambodia. Yet, beyond these military imperatives, there were broader alleged political aspirations at play. In a 1971 report to Moscow, Soviet Ambassador Shcherbakov mentioned that Vietnamese officials had cautiously raised the idea of a "Socialist Federation of Indochina".[194]

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[190] *Black Paper: Facts and Evidences of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam Against Kampuchea*, pp. 3-30.

[191] *Ivi*, pp. 31-51.

[192] *Ivi*, pp. 3-8. "It is rather Vietnam aggressor, annexationist and swallower of territories which, in Hitler's style, has put conditions on Democratic Kampuchea".

[193] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, pp. 153-154.

[194] Посольство СССР в ДРВ, *О политике партии трудящихся Вьетнама в решении проблем Индокитая и наших задачах, вытекающих из решений XXIV съезда КПСС* (*About the Policy of the Vietnam Workers' Party Toward a Solution of the Problem of Indochina and Our Tasks, Flowing From the Decisions of the 24th Congress of the CPSU*), [Политическое письмо] (*Political Letter*), May 25, 1971, p. 14, TsKhSD, Fond 89, Opis 54, Delo 10, p. 36, cited in S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 51. Unlike Morris, who had access to transcriptions from Russian archives, particularly Soviet Party Central Committee records, I do not have the ability to consult these materials directly. As Vietnamese and Chinese Communist Party archives remain inaccessible, this prevents a direct comparison with primary sources, limiting the scope of verification.

While acknowledging the potential benefits of such a structure for the socialist movement, the Soviets also recognized the problematic nature of Vietnam's self-centeredness and its condescending attitude toward its Laotian and Cambodian allies. The report noted how the Vietnamese approach to regional leadership often resulted in latent dissatisfaction among these allies, highlighting Hanoi's ambition to subordinate Laos and Cambodia to its strategic interests.[195]

While it should be noted that Hanoi's ambitions in Cambodia lacked public evidence beyond its logistical and strategic role in supporting the Viet Cong in the South, Cambodia was driven by deep ideological motives and a perceived threat from Vietnam. Though deliberately exaggerated in the Livre Noir, this perception held a grain of truth, as even the Soviets acknowledged it.[196]

Additionally, the Khmer Rouge likely embraced resentment over their forced dissolution by Vietnam as part of the 1954 Paris Agreements, a move carried out under pressure from both the Soviet Union and China, whose primary objective was regional stabilization.[197] All these compounded factors provide strong evidence of the deep hostility between Phnom Penh and Hanoi following 1975.

2.3 Chinese and Soviet factionalization in Indochina

The Pol Pot's decision to align with China was a calculated response to a shifting regional power balance, despite his rigid nationalism and isolationist stance. Faced with growing Vietnamese influence and the declining support of traditional allies, he exploited China's rising prominence to secure both political backing and material aid. This strategic realignment

[195] Посольство СССР в ДРВ, *О политике партии трудящихся Вьетнама в решении проблем Индокитая и наших задачах, вытекающих из решений XXIV съезда КПСС* (*About the Policy of the Vietnam Workers' Party Toward a Solution of the Problem of Indochina and Our Tasks, Flowing From the Decisions of the 24th Congress of the CPSU*), [Политическое письмо] (*Political Letter*), May 25, 1971, p. 14, TsKhSD, Fond 89, Opis 54, Delo 10, p. 36.

[196] Посольство СССР в ДРВ, Политический отчет посольства СССР в Демократической Республике Вьетнам за 1972 год (*Political Report of the Embassy of the USSR in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for 1972*), Hanoi, February 1973, p. 11, TsKhSD, Fond 5, Opis 64, Delo 472, p. 13, cited in S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 66. Taking the words of the Soviet Ambassador expressing the perceived ambitions of Hanoi: "The program of the Vietnamese comrades for Indochina is to replace the reactionary regimes in Saigon, Vientiane, and Phnom Penh with progressive ones, and later when all Vietnam, and also Laos and Cambodia, start on the road to socialism, to move toward the establishment of a Federation of the Indochinese countries. This course of the VWP [Vietnam Workers' Party] flows from the program of the former Communist party of Indochina".

[197] T. S. AN, "Turmoil in Indochina: The Vietnam-Cambodia Conflict", *Asian Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1978, p. 246.

bolstered his anti-Vietnamese stance and helped legitimize his radical vision for Cambodia, effectively turning regional rivalries to his advantage.

His words during a 1977 meeting with Hua Guofeng are particularly significant in light of the reconfiguration of the international communist order: «The Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Cuba are cooperating in order to fight us in the border areas. ...We rely on our Chinese friends in the North. Southeast Asia is united. This situation encourages us strategically».[198]

For Beijing, this alliance was equally advantageous, as it served to counter Vietnam, which was perceived as a regional threat. China's stance aligned with its ongoing rift with the Soviet Union and reflected its broader imperial ambitions in Southeast Asia. Throughout history, China has often strategically shaped its regional environment by forming friendly partnerships with regional actors to protect its broader spheres of influence and maintain harmony—a concept that will be further explored later in view Confucianism.[199]

China's diplomatic approach has long been framed by the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*, introduced in 1954 alongside India and Burma: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.[200] While these principles provided a normative foundation for China's international relations, they also functioned as a strategic tool, echoing Sun Tzu's notion of winning without fighting. By prioritizing diplomacy and economic leverage, China could expand its influence while avoiding direct confrontation, invoking these principles when convenient but disregarding them when power politics dictated a more assertive stance.

Cambodia under Pol Pot presented a unique opportunity. His regime, isolated and unpredictable, had few potential allies, making it particularly susceptible to Chinese influence. By supporting the Khmer Rouge, Beijing secured a dependent and strategically positioned partner with minimal external competition. This relationship exemplified China's broader geopolitical strategy: leveraging unstable yet strategically valuable actors to reinforce its regional dominance while maintaining a facade of ideological consistency.

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[198] O. A. WESTAD, C. JIAN, S. TØNNESSON, N. V. TUNG, J. G. HERSHBERG, *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977*, pp. 193-194.

[199] H. FENG, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Confucianism, Leadership and War*, Routledge, New York/London, 2007, pp. 3-5.

[200] MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence*, May 31, 2024, accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367542.html; S. BURGOS, S. EAR, "China's Strategic Interests in Cambodia: Influence and Resources", *Asian Survey*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2010, p. 615. See also S. RICHARDSON, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009.

Beijing provided the GRUNK with an annual budget of approximately two million U.S. dollars and offered political backing,[201] including hosting Sihanouk during the war against Lon Nol.[202] The assistance was extended and even reinforced after Pol Pot's rise to power in 1975, especially since by then, Vietnam's unification process was complete.

This aiding was primarily focused on the military furniture. Especially in artillery for defending against air assault, plans were made to expand DK's small caliber cannons furniture.[203] This already suggests that China was militarily preparing Cambodia for a confrontation with Vietnam, considering their relative strengths. Democratic Kampuchea lacked a conventional air force, while Vietnam had 12,000 personnel in its air force and 300 combat aircraft, including a light bomber squadron and eight fighter-ground attack squadrons with 150 aircraft.[204]

This claim is further supported by China's strategic emphasis on aviation. In October 1975, Chinese officials assessed Cambodia's remaining aircraft and, recognizing the need to restore DK's air capabilities, proposed pilot training programs and the expansion of airport infrastructure. Their plan included upgrading Phnom Penh's airstrip and constructing new airfields to strengthen operational capacity.[205]

From 1976, high-level meetings between DK officials and Chinese artillery experts facilitated discussions on key military priorities, leading to the organization of technical training programs and artillery exercises. These initiatives aimed at improving DK's artillery operations, military strategy, and overall defense capabilities. Training courses were designed to develop specialists in weaponry, telecommunications, intelligence, and territorial surveillance, with an emphasis on artillery operators. [206]

To accelerate the process, the use of interpreters was minimized, and training was concentrated on senior cadres rather than ordinary soldiers. China encouraged DK to develop autonomous training methods tailored to its specific needs, optimizing programs to focus on practical defense requirements.[207]

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[201] A. MERTHA, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca/London, 2014, p. 2.

[202] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 40; *Ibidem*.

[203] A. MERTHA, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, p. 80.

[204] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 103. This causal connection between the allocation of anti-aircraft guns and Cambodia's tactical inferiority is not explicitly confirmed by either source. However, it is plausible given the military context.

[205] A. MERTHA, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, pp. 82-83.

[206] J. D. CIORCIARI, "China and the Pol Pot Regime", *Cold War History*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 11-13.

[207] A. MERTHA, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, p. 81.

In addition to military supplies, China provided emergency aid immediately after Phnom Penh's fall in 1975, sending tons of rice, salt, medicine, and textiles accounting for 80% of Cambodia's imports.[208] Beijing financed key infrastructure projects, including railway and port repairs, notably improving the Phnom Penh–Kampong Som line to boost trade.[209] These pieces of evidence not only highlight China's historical weight in the Cambodian context but also provide insight into the enduring diplomatic strategy of the Dragon's aid diplomacy, a consistent feature of its foreign policy, replicated across Africa, Asia, and Latin America to this day.

However, it's still necessary remember that this was a relations without any kind of friction, especially considering the intricate character of Pol Pot. This became particularly evident after Mao's death in 1976, as he had been a role model for the Khmer Rouge. In contrast, Deng Xiaoping was less enthusiastic about Pol Pot and the direction Cambodia was taking. Yet, pragmatism remained central to Deng's political vision, and given the far greater threat posed by Vietnam, Cambodia had to be sustained as a strategic counterbalance.[210]

The Soviet Union, previously referenced primarily to contextualize Cold War dynamics and the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, now takes center stage in analyzing its impacts in the outbreak of the Third Indochina War. As we will see, Moscow mirrored Beijing's actions, triggering what can be regarded as the first genuine "proxy war" between the two powers in Cambodia.

This arises from two key factors. First, the complete fragmentation of the communist bloc, especially immediately before and after the Cambodian invasion, which redefined alliances and geopolitical strategies. Second, the Soviet Union's near-central role in shaping Vietnam's aggressiveness toward Cambodia. Here, we pursue to answer a critical question: how did Moscow incentivize Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia, and how did this contribute to Beijing's growing concerns?

As discussed before, Soviet Union, in contrast with China, was the main actor keeping alive the huge aiding to Vietnam immediately after the unification, that was in enormous economic adversities.[211] Moscow agreed to finance the 60% of five-year plan from 1976. This long-term

[208] J. D. CIORCIARI, "China and the Pol Pot Regime", pp. 10-11
[209] A. MERTHA, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, p. 8.
[210] J. D. CIORCIARI, "China and the Pol Pot Regime", pp. 21, 24.
[211] K. PATH, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking During the Third Indochina War*, p. 25; D. PIKE, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance*, Routledge, New York/Abingdon, 2019, p. 127 ff; S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 210.

agreement provided for the modernization of agricultural and industrial sectors, the supply of commodities[212] and technical assistance.[213]

However, this was somewhat predictable, given Moscow's efforts in the preceding years of the Vietnam conflict. What is truly noteworthy and marks a new paradigm is Vietnam's entry into Comecon in 1978. This was anticipated by the entry of the International Bank for Economic Cooperation (IBEC), the institution that sought to enhance economic integration within the Eastern Bloc by standardizing financial operations and reducing dependency on Western currencies.[214] After this, the Vietnamese requested in first part of 1978 the admission in the Comecon, becoming member later in June.[215]

Furthermore, the Soviet Union played an active role in consistently supplying Vietnam with military aid and maintained ongoing consultations with Hanoi regarding the Cambodian invasion. In this matter, arms supplies saw a sharp increase between 1976 and 1977, rising from $47 million to $100 million USD. The following years witnessed further escalation, reaching an all-time high of $1.15 billion in 1979.[216] These data reveal a correlation between Moscow's military aid and the intensification of conflicts in Indochina, particularly the Cambodian invasion and the Sino-Vietnamese War. The following part will further reinforce the causal link between these two processes.

The months leading up to the Cambodian operation were marked by intensive diplomatic exchanges between the USSR and Vietnam. Numerous conversations between the Vietnamese government and Soviet ambassadors, documented in Morris' book *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, appear to have centered on the Cambodian issue. Notably, in September 1978, Le Duan formally informed the Soviet ambassador of the necessity to overthrow Pol Pot's regime by 1979.[217]

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[212] D. PIKE, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance*, p. 129. The quantified supply was "5 million metric tons of petroleum products; 4.5 million mt of grain, mostly wheat; 1.5 million mt of chemical fertilizer; 400,000 mt of steel and iron; 1.6 million mt of cotton, and 100 million meters of cloth. 43 Food shipments, including grain, totaled 1.4 million tons in 1978, 2.1 million tons in 1979, and 1.9 million tons in 1980, at a three-year cost of about $900 million"

[213] *Ivi*, pp. 128-129.

[214] INTERNATIONAL BANK FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION, *Agreement and Statutes*, *International Legal Materials*, vol. 3, no. 2, Cambridge University Press, Moscow, March 1964, pp. 324-338, accessed February 16, 2025.

[215] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, pp. 209-210.

[216] D. PIKE, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance*, Routledge, New York/Abingdon, 2019, Table 6.3, p. 139. This data was compiled over the years from a wide range of sources, including U.S. government agencies, Japanese institutes, as well as government and private sources in London, Paris, and Moscow. Additionally, the term "all-time record" refers to the highest level reached up to that point, as military aid would later peak at $1.7 billion in 1985.

[217] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, pp. 215-216.

Furthermore, the same year in June Le Duan went to Moscow to discuss with Brezhnev on the situation in Indochina, [218] even though the transcription of the conversation is not available, the presence of deputy chief of staff of the Vietnam People's Army, Le Truong Tann, validates the hypothesis of Soviet centrality for the operation.[219]

The Vietnamese alignment with the Soviet bloc reached its final stage on November 3rd with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the two nations. However, as in the entire post-1975 process, no formal mention was made of a military alliance; instead, the focus was placed on economic cooperation.[220] Yet, this alone was enough for China to fuel its encirclement anxiety. From that point onward, Beijing likely saw its sphere of influence in Indochina as irretrievable through diplomatic means. The only viable way to restore Chinese leverage in the region was either by exploiting the instability created by Cambodia or through a direct confrontation with Vietnam.

2.4 The invasion of Kampuchea

The political tension between the two Indochinese countries soon evolved in belligerent actions. In January 1977 the Khmers Rouges attacked multiple Vietnamese villages near the borders.[221] Cambodia repeatedly attacked the provinces in South Vietnam with the same approach: a low-intensity war in order to provoke Hanoi, involving the killing of civilians and the destruction of buildings.[222] However, Hanoi was not prone to start a new war after almost thirty years of conflict.

Le Duan tried to reach a peaceful resolution or at least to patiently consider all the options and do not react recklessly, especially considering the Chinese threat. The initial phase of a controlled escalation saw Vietnam avoiding open engagement in all-out war while laying the groundwork for a broader intervention.[223] This was evident in the stockpiling of secret food reserves in Cambodia and support for anti-Pol Pot dissidents.

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[218] "Запись беседы с членом Политбюро ЦК КПВ, министром иностранных дел Нгуен Зюй Чинем" ("Report of a Meeting with Member of the Politburo of the DRV Central Committee, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Duy Trinh"), June 15, 1978, TsKhSD, Fond 5, Opis 75, Delo 1062, p. 25. Cited in S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 210.

[219] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 212.

[220] *Ivi*, pp. 213-215. "According to a former senior Soviet official, Mikhail Kapitsa, it was a political treaty only. The Vietnamese had wanted a clear formulation of military assistance, but the Soviets refused. The Soviet Union had no intention of going to war with China over Vietnam".

[221] G. EVANS, K. ROWLEY, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon*, pp. 116-117.

[222] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, pp. 98-99.

[223] B. KIERNAN, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, p. 374.

The escalation intensified further in December in the Cambodian province of Svay Rieng, located 90 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh City. The confrontation saw Vietnam deploying artillery, aircraft, and 20,000 troops in a show of force meant to intimidate the Khmer Rouge. However, it had the opposite effect. Instead of backing down, Phnom Penh responded by cutting diplomatic ties with Vietnam on December 31, 1977.[224]

Hanoi's reconciliation effort culminated in the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in January 1978. In an attempt to mediate between the two countries, the Lao ambassador in Phnom Penh acted as an intermediary, conveying Vietnam's willingness to ease tensions. However, Cambodia's foreign ministry firmly rejected any rapprochement. In a typical totalitarian distortion of reality, Phnom Penh Radio framed in May the voluntary retreat as a Khmer Rouge "victory" over Vietnam.[225]

At this point, even if reluctant, Hanoi came to view invasion as the only viable strategy to remove Pol Pot, particularly in light of the damage inflicted by Khmer Rouge attacks in southern Vietnam[226] and aware of the persecution of Vietnamese people in Cambodia. Moreover, this was supposed to be an easy operation, given Vietnam's clear military superiority over the Cambodian army.[227] The decision was allegedly made during a special politburo meeting in Hanoi in February 1978.[228]

At the same time, a "liberation army" was formed with the refugees coming from Cambodia to Vietnam. In response, the CPK escalated its terror measures, resorting to tactics it was already well accustomed to. Paradoxically, the SRV publicly endorsed Pol Pot's crackdown, recognizing it as strategically advantageous since it weakened his own movement and diminished his standing on the international stage, ultimately paving the way for a justified Vietnamese invasion.[229]

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[224] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, pp. 101-102.

[225] *Ivi*, p. 103; G. EVANS, K. ROWLEY, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon*, pp. 120-121.

[226] G. EVANS, K. ROWLEY, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon*, pp. 120-121. "According to statistics released by Hanoi in 1979, 25 townships and 96 villages were destroyed by the Khmers Rouges, 257,000 people were rendered homeless, and 100,000 hectares of farmland had to be abandoned because of the fighting".

[227] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 103. In 1977, Democratic Kampuchea's armed forces numbered 70,000, while the SRV's had 615,000. DK had mainly light infantry with minimal armored vehicles and no significant air force, whereas SRV had 900 tanks, a 12,000-person air force, and 300 combat aircraft. DK's population was under 7 million, while SRV had nearly 50 million. Additionally, half of Cambodia's population was physically and mentally exhausted due to hunger and disease, unlike the relatively healthier Vietnamese.

[228] W. S. TURLEY, J. RACE, "The Third Indochina War", *Foreign Policy*, no. 38, 1980, p. 98.

[229] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 106. Hanoi was allowed to do so since the cooperation with the Front was kept secret.

However, Pol Pot's regime maintained its grip on power, and the fueled uprisings appeared insufficient to decisively overthrow the Khmer Rouge. As a result, Le Duan and the Vietnamese Politburo gradually shifted toward the February decision to launch a large-scale invasion. The Chinese threat, though not necessarily perceived as a direct attack on Vietnamese territory but rather as additional support for Cambodia, likely incentivized the process, since it would have complicated the operation.[230]

A media campaign started in the fall of 1978 supporting the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation and inspire the population in insurging against the regime. By publicly legitimizing the Front, the SRV strategically engineered a puppet coalition, designed to take control of Cambodia once the Khmer Rouge were eliminated.[231]

The operation officially started on December 25, 1975. Over thirteen divisions were deployed, and approximately 130.000 troops. On January 7, 1979, Phnom Penh fell, and a new government was installed under the newly established People's Republic of Kampuchea, with Heng Samrin[232], a former Khmer Rouge, appointed as head of state. The ruling party became the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP)[233], effectively backed by Vietnam.[234]

Even though the military plan had achieved its operational objectives and the KPRP initiated a normalization process, the Khmer Rouge managed to reorganize their forces, launching a guerrilla war against the new status quo and the Vietnamese army. This prevented the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) from fully controlling the entire country, despite the support of Vietnamese troops, which reached a peak of over 200,000 stationed in Cambodia by 1985.[235]

One of the most unexpected developments in this context was the U.S. decision to vote in favor of maintaining Cambodia's seat at the United Nations under the representation of the

[230] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, pp. 108-109. This was communicated to the Soviets, as Lê Duẩn indicated that Vietnam needed to act before China could strengthen its position in Cambodia. He assessed that Beijing lacked the capability to deploy ten divisions there efficiently and that a land offensive from the north was unfeasible.

[231] *Ivi*, pp. 110-111.

[232] Heng Samrin (1934) was a former Khmer Rouge commander who defected and became a key leader in the Vietnamese-backed government that ousted Pol Pot in 1979. Serving as head of state (1979–1992) and later as President of the National Assembly, he played a central role in stabilizing post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia under Vietnamese influence.

[233] The Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), founded in 1951 to be the Cambodian component successor to the Indochinese Communist Party, was the predecessor of today's Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Initially aligned with the Vietnamese communists, it played a key role in opposing the Khmer Rouge and establishing the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–1989) under Vietnamese-backed rule. It rebranded as the CPP in 1991, maintaining political dominance in Cambodia.

[234] S. J. MORRIS, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, p. 111.

[235] N. CHANDA, "Civil War in Cambodia?" *Foreign Policy*, no. 76, 1989, p. 30.

Khmer Rouge deposed regime, in September 1979.[236] Washington did not completely support the Khmer Rouge, yet its actions were driven by a diplomatic cynicism and strategic pragmatism. Rather than adhering to its public condemnation of human rights abuses, Washington covertly backed the Khmer Rouge, a maneuver that not only further isolated the USSR and Vietnam but also served to reinforce its emerging ties with China.

Without dwelling too much on the events in Cambodia in the following years, which are marginal to our analysis, it is worth mentioning that the invasion resulted in 60,000 Vietnamese casualties.[237] The SRV completed its troop withdrawal only in September 1989, without having effectively eliminated the country's internal conflicts, which remained in a state of evident instability.[238] From a Western perspective, the invasion of Cambodia became Vietnam's own Vietnam.

2.5 Beijing's tipping point

Meanwhile the attention was primarly focused on the Sino-Soviet decoupling and the Cambodian war, it is important to delineate other immediate factors concerning China. One of them was the territorial dispute which remained an open issue, extending beyond the previously mentioned Spratly and Paracel Islands to the demarcation of the land border between Vietnam and China. The origins of the dispute trace back to the Franco-Chinese Treaty of 1887, which delineated the border between French Indochina (including Vietnam) and China.[239]

However, the agreement relied heavily on natural features such as rivers and mountain ridges, along with imprecise cartographic references, leaving room for interpretation and future contention. Moreover, when the treaty was signed, the Ming dynasty was in crisis, and the agreement was perceived by the Chinese as both inequitable and cynical, product of the "Century of Humiliation".[240]

Over time, erosion and shifting waterways altered the landscape, further complicating territorial claims. Hanoi accused Beijing of shifting boundary markers to gain access to fertile agricultural land, while China argued that disputes only emerged after 1975, as a result of

[236] D. OBERDORFER, "U.S. to Support Pol Pot Regime for U.N. Seat", *The Washington Post*, September 15, 1980; N. CHANDA, *Brother Enemy: The War After the War*, Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1987, p. 377.

[237] N. CHANDA, "Civil War in Cambodia?" *Foreign Policy*, no. 76, 1989, p. 31.

[238] *Ivi*, pp. 26-43.

[239] S. J. HOOD, *Dragons Entangled: Indo-China and the China-Vietnam War*, pp. 112-115

[240] To further understand how the so called "Century of Humiliation" has shaped partially the post-1949 Chinese foreign policy, see also W. A. CALLAHAN, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2004.

Vietnam's increasingly hostile stance and the militarization of the border.[241] Beijing claimed that the number of border clashes rose from 752 in 1977 to 1,100 in 1978.[242]

China's approach toward Vietnam reflects a long-standing behavioral pattern, repeatedly evident in the events discussed so far. At times, this stance has escalated into swift military clashes, such as the 1969 border conflict with the USSR or the 1962 war against India over territorial disputes in the Himalayas.[243]

Beijing accused the SRV of mistreating the Chinese diaspora in Vietnam, which at the time numbered 1.7 million.[244] Given that the Chinese community was predominantly engaged in entrepreneurial activities, Hanoi's "socialization"[245] policy had a particularly detrimental impact on them. The persecution extended to the forced closure of Chinese schools and newspapers, the confiscation of business assets and properties, the firing and ostracization of Chinese workers, and ultimately, the mass expulsion[246] of thousands of Chinese residents from Vietnam.[247]

As tensions escalated with Vietnam, China sought to strengthen its geopolitical positioning on the global stage, not just through direct confrontations but also by reinforcing diplomatic alliances. It was within this context that one event stood out as highly symbolic amid the general confusion of early 1979: Deng Xiaoping's trip to the U.S. from January 28 to February 5, the first-ever visit of a Chinese leader to Washington during the Communist era. The message launched was a crystal-clear response to the Soviet Union: China was decisively aligning itself with the United States, no longer ambiguously as in the past.

What is even more important is what discussed between President Carter and Deng Xiaoping on January 29. In this conversation, the Vietnamese issue took center stage, with Deng Xiaoping strategically framing Vietnam as an emerging regional threat. He voiced his concerns

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[241] S. J. HOOD, *Dragons Entangled: Indo-China and the China-Vietnam War*, pp. 115-117.

[242] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2015, p. 41.

[243] S. J. HOOD, *Dragons Entangled: Indo-China and the China-Vietnam War*, Table 5.1, p. 111; For further insights into the dispute and the resulting conflict with India, see also B. LINTNER, China's India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1st edition, 2018. For additional information on China's territorial disputes, see also B. A. ELLEMAN, S. KOTKIN, C. SCHOFIELD (eds.), *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbors in Asia*, M.E. Sharpe, New York/London, 2013.

[244] *Ivi*, pp. 136. This book gives a figure of 1.7 million Chinese residing in Vietnam until the exodus following the persecutions at the end of '70s. The book K. C. CHEN, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, Hoover Press, Stanford, 1987 also gives a near figure of 300.000 Chinese in the south and 1.2-1.4 millions residing in the north, pp. 52, 54.

[245] In this context, "socialization" refers to the post-1975 policy of forcibly integrating Vietnam's society into a socialist order. While not exclusively targeting the ethnic Chinese, the policy hit them hardest due to their dominant role in entrepreneurship.

[246] S. J. HOOD, *Dragons Entangled: Indo-China and the China-Vietnam War*, pp. 136-149. 160.000 were the Chinese expulsed directly or indirectly by Hanoi in the period 1975-1979.

[247] *Ivi*, pp. 137, 141–142, 143–149.

about Hanoi's expansionist ambitions, depicting Vietnam as a proxy of the Soviet Union and a destabilizing force in Southeast Asia.[248]

In a deliberate and calculated manner, Deng emphasized that Vietnam was not merely seeking to exercise influence over Cambodia and Laos, but rather aspired to establish a hegemonic structure in the region, stating that its goal was to create a "so-called Indochinese Federation to include more than three states. Ho Chi Minh cherished this idea".[249] Additionally, the PRC leader reported the borders problems: "Vietnamese create trouble for us day in and day out. There are continuous incidents and small-scale conflicts".

The most significant moment in the January 29 conversation was Deng Xiaoping's direct announcement to President Carter of "some punishment over a short period of time" as a means to "put a restraint on Vietnamese ambitions". This disclosure represented an unprecedented moment of openness for a country like China, which, during its first official visit to the U.S., openly shared such strategic information. As Kissinger critically observed "to act as allies without forming an alliance was pushing realism to extremes".[250]

Nevertheless, Carter, already preoccupied by several crisis around the world,[251] remained cautious, recognizing that further escalation could worse international perception of China and destabilize the region. While the U.S. upheld its stance against Vietnam-Soviet front, its support remained limited to intelligence briefings, without endorsing direct military action.[252]

The rationale behind the Beijing's disclosure likely derives from two key motivations. First, China sought to demonstrate to the United States a convergence of interests in countering both the Soviet Front and Vietnam, "playing the role of Cuba". Even in Deng's choice of words, there is a clear attempt to foster a sense of alignment and complicity with the U.S. government. This leads to the second reason: China aimed to secure American "moral support in the international field",[253] reinforcing its position against Vietnam while ensuring that Washington remained sympathetic to its strategic objectives.

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[248] U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XIII: China*, Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, January 29, 1979, 5:00–5:40 p.m., Document 205, accessed February 17, 2025, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d205.

[249] *Ibidem*.

[250] H. KISSINGER, *On China*, p. 316.

[251] In January 1979, Carter was already dealing with the unfolding Iranian Revolution, rising tensions in Afghanistan, the energy crisis due to oil supply disruptions, and growing instability in Nicaragua.

[252] U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XIII: China*, Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, January 29, 1979, 5:00–5:40 p.m., Document 205, accessed February 18, 2025, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d205.

[253] *Ibidem*.

The second motivation is rooted in China's internal power dynamics, in particular in the Deng rivalry with Hua Guofeng[254]. The latter, Mao's designated successor, sought to preserve Maoist policies sought to preserve Maoist policies and maintain political continuity, while Deng, rehabilitated in 1977, initially lacked overwhelming authority and faced resistance from Hua and his allies.[255]

At the Third Plenum of the 11th Congress in December 1978, Deng consolidated his power, marking a decisive shift toward economic modernization, a more pragmatic foreign policy, and, as we will see shortly, a restoration of the PRC's military apparatus.[256] The new agenda intended on one hand to rapidly improve the relations with the United States, driven by both economic and diplomatic objectives, which were immediately put into action, as demonstrated by this visit.

The program required a strong demonstration of authority, aimed both at internal adversaries, such as Hua Guofeng,[257] and at international actors. A potential military operation against Vietnam, even if largely symbolic, could have sent a clear message to the Soviet Union, the United States, Vietnam, and internal adversaries.

2.6 Deng's objectives

The close alignment between Vietnam and the Soviet Union, the partial collapse of Pol Pot's regime, China's growing sense of encirclement, and its political dynamics have all set the stage for the next major confrontation. With these elements in place, we can now move beyond the broader strategic framework and focus on a detailed investigation of the immediate and long-term objectives.

Understandably, the range of objectives was not completely cleared out in Washington conversations. Additionally, we can rely on reconstructions based on internal briefings, interviews, official documents and internal PLA reports for giving a further explanation or

[254] Hua Guofeng (1921–2008) was Mao Zedong's designated successor and served as Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (1976–1981) and Premier (1976–1980). He oversaw the arrest of the Gang of Four, ending the Cultural Revolution, but his attempt to continue Maoist policies led to his marginalization. Deng Xiaoping eventually replaced him as China's paramount leader, steering the country toward economic reform.

[255] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2015, p. 44-60

[256] *Ivi*, pp. 44-60.

[257] *Ibidem*. Deng Xiaoping unilaterally decided on the invasion, presenting it to the expanded Politburo on December 31, 1978, not for approval but as a fait accompli. Hua Guofeng, still the formal head of the Party, played no central role in the planning and offered no opposition, further accelerating his political marginalization. Additionally, Deng restructured military command without Hua's involvement, appointing General Xu Shiyou (Guangxi front) and Yang Dezhi (Yunnan front) while sidelining General Wang Bicheng, a figure linked to conservative factions.

interpretations.[258] However, due to the secrecy and opacity of the Chinese political system, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the exact decision-making process remains challenging.

The most widely accepted view holds that the primary objective of the war was "punitive" in nature. This is evident not only from Deng's own words, referring to an "appropriate limited lesson" during his January 29 conversation with American officials, but also in interviews conducted with Chinese insiders in the years following 1979.[259] As King C. Chen explains in his book, these accounts illustrate that the operation was intended as a measured, symbolic penalty against Vietnam, rather than as an attempt to secure permanent territorial gains.[260]

In this sense, the operation should be understood as part of the broader Third Indochina War, with the "lesson" China sought to deliver to Hanoi being directly linked to the concurrent Vietnamese incursions in the Chinese soil and events in Cambodia. Beijing hoped that a military threat, even if primarily intimidatory, would deter Vietnam from continuing its offensive against the Chinese-proxy Khmer Rouge and its low-intensity clashes in the northern borders.[261]

A second potential aim for this conflict is related to the larger context of the Sino-Soviet decoupling and rivalry. In this sense, the invasion served as a direct message to Moscow: China was capable of taking military action against its Soviet-backed and was determined to reassert its strategic dominance in the region—whether indirectly by supporting Pol Pot's regime or directly through military confrontation with Hanoi.[262]

This interpretation gains further credibility in light of China's recent diplomatic rapprochement with the United States, suggesting that Deng sought to strengthen this relationship by aligning Beijing's actions with Washington's strategic interests. By invading Vietnam, a nation the U.S. had fought for nearly a decade, and by taking an aggressive stance

[258] K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", *Occasional Papers/Reprint Series in Contemporary Asian Studies*, no. 5, 1983, p. 8. Two important meeting were held: the first was the Chinese Central Military Commission in Beijing from February 9 to 12, and a second briefing session was convened in Beijing in the afternoon of February 16.

[259] *Ivi*, p. 8, n. 23. While the text omits specific details of the interviews for brevity, further context is provided in Chen's book. He describes how interviews were conducted with key Chinese military and political insiders—initially in Hong Kong during late March 1979 and later corroborated by discussions in New York in April 1981—along with contemporaneous reports from Hong Kong media. These sources offer valuable firsthand insights into the strategic rationale behind the operation, underscoring its limited and symbolic nature.

[260] *Ivi,* pp. 8-9.

[261] *Ibidem*.

[262] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, p. 64. "According to Chinese scholars, the PRC's decision to wage war against Vietnam was influenced by Chinese leaders' reaction to the Soviet Union's genuine threat, which caused them to pursue strategic cooperation with the United States against the Soviet Union".

against Soviet influence, China positioned itself as a valuable counterweight to Moscow in Southeast Asia. This perspective is notably supported by Henry Kissinger, who viewed the invasion as part of China's broader strategy to secure its place within the global balance of power while solidifying its emerging partnership with the United States.[263]

A third additional perspective arises from a broader, almost timeless framework rooted in China's enduring pursuit of "harmony" and "order" principles, deeply rooted in Confucianism. This perspective transcends the specific ideology or form of government adopted by the Dragon. This Sino-centric view posits that a moral government not only ensures domestic prosperity but also establishes China as a universal paradigm for leadership, with its ethical influence extending even to non-Chinese peoples. In this view, war should be avoided because only a virtuous leader could bring harmony and order in the society.[264]

The Chinese designation of the operation as a "self-defense war"[265] reflects this notion. While this characterization partially served to publicly justify the invasion, it also underscores the operation's role as a controlled mechanism to reaffirm Chinese dominance within a hierarchical order internal and external, a concept previously discussed in the context of the Sino-French War in the first chapter (pp. 8-10).

Even though this perspective may be less concrete and more generalized than the previous two, it provides valuable insights into the grand strategy that China has historically pursued, emphasizing its long-standing quest for regional influence and moral authority. However, a comprehensive analysis of Confucianism's influence on Chinese foreign relations would require a much broader examination. This conceptualization of China's worldview can help explain the recurring and persistent territorial disputes that have shaped the country's foreign policy for centuries.[266]

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[263] H. KISSINGER, *On China*, pp. 322-325.

[264] H. FENG, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Confucianism, Leadership and War*, pp. 18-19.

[265] H. KISSINGER, *On China*, p. 320; K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", p. 2; J. LI, H. WANG, *纪念改革开放 40 周年* (*Commemorating 40 Years of Reform and Opening*), People's Liberation Army, Beijing, 2018. While the first two references can be considered secondary sources, the third can be regarded as a primary source, as it originates from Chinese institutional bodies. Nevertheless, accessing Chinese primary sources is particularly challenging. This difficulty stems from the Chinese government's policy of controlling historical narratives, often seeking to downplay or omit certain events from public memory, likewise the Sino-Vietnamese war. Additionally, the limited availability of Chinese newspapers and periodicals from that period in Western archives further hinder s comprehensive research.

[266] For additional information on China's territorial disputes, see also B. A. ELLEMAN, S. KOTKIN, C. SCHOFIELD (eds.), *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbors in Asia*, M.E. Sharpe, New York/London, 2013. The volume examines China's territorial disputes on both land and maritime fronts, highlighting conflicts with numerous neighboring countries—from India, Bhutan, and Pakistan to Russia, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Taiwan—as well as claims in the South China Sea, involving regional actors such as the

History rarely moves in a straight line; it flows like a river—sometimes steady, sometimes turbulent—shaped by past ambitions, miscalculations, and shifting power dynamics. The Sino-Vietnamese War was not an isolated clash but the culmination of decades of unresolved tensions, marking a pivotal shift in China's strategic trajectory.

Though brief, lasting only 30 days, the war's significance extended beyond the battlefield. It coincided with China's internal transformation and evolving foreign policy, signaling the early tremors of its rise as a global power. Beijing's so-called "self-defensive" operation was less about military gains and more about asserting regional dominance, sending a message to both Moscow and Washington.

To fully grasp its implications, we must examine the clashes and shifting alliances that defined the conflict. The war acted as a turning point, exposing diplomatic failures while reshaping the global order. In the next pages, we will analyze how this short, yet decisive confrontation became both a product and a catalyst of the geopolitical transformations that followed.

Philippines, Malaysia, and Japan. Unlike interpretations rooted in Confucianism, this study offers a factual analysis of the conflicts, focusing on the specific circumstances surrounding each dispute.

Chapter 3

3. The War and its Consequences (1979-1991)

By early 1979, tensions between China and Vietnam had escalated beyond the realm of diplomacy. After years of political frictions, border skirmishes, and the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia, Beijing decided to launch a large-scale military operation. The war, officially framed as a punitive expedition, was deeply intertwined with regional geopolitics and the shifting balance of power in Southeast Asia.

Following Clausewitz's famous maxim that war is never an isolate act,[267] this conflict was far more than a mere military confrontation. It was a multidimensional event, intertwining diplomacy, ideology, economic pressures, and national identity, each playing a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of both nations—not just on the battlefield, but in their broader political and strategic evolution.

For instance, beyond the battlefield itself, the popular support—always crucial in any war—became even more vital under Maoist doctrine's concept of "People's War". This was evident in the extensive propaganda campaigns launched by the government, designed to awaken patriotic enthusiasm and unite the public by portraying Vietnam as a serious threat. Local authorities orchestrated mass meetings and rallies, shaping public opinion and countering domestic skepticism amid ongoing economic and social hardships. Once the invasion began, this grassroots mobilization turned into tangible logistical support—civilians provided food, shelter, and labor, while volunteer militias formed to reinforce military operations.[268]

As we will see in this chapter, this is just one of many extra-military dimensions of the conflict, demonstrating how war extends far beyond the battlefield, intertwining with broader political, social, and ideological forces. However, we will begin by examining the military dimension, analyzing the strategies, tactics, and operational challenges faced during the conflict. From there, we will broaden our perspective, exploring how these military events were deeply connected to diplomatic maneuvering, ideological struggles, and economic pressures that shaped the war's larger significance.

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[267] K. VON CLAUSEWITZ, *Della Guerra*, transl. A. BOLLATI, E. CANEVARI, vol. 1, Mondadori, Milan, 1978, pp. 24-26.

[268] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 85-88.

3.1 The first phase of the operation

Already in the months leading up to the operation, the Chinese government had strategically positioned a substantial military force near its southern borders. A total of 31 divisions, consisting in 1200 tanks and minimum 330,000 troops, approximately ten percent of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), were stationed and awaiting orders to cross the border. [269] The preparations started at the end of 1978 presumably,[270] therefore it's likely that Deng visited Washington with the precise military plan in his pocket.

The Southern Front was structured into two wings. The Eastern Wing, commanded by General Xu Shiyou, the overall commander of the Southern Front, operated across the Guangxi and Guangdong provinces. Meanwhile, the Western Wing, led by Yang Dezhi, the deputy commander of the Southern Front, conducted operations in Yunnan.[271]

The air force, commanded by Zhang Ting, the chief of staff of the Southern Front, provided support to the ground forces with 948 fighters.[272] However, the People Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), despite its numerical superiority,[273] was behind in terms of quality and technological advancement compared to the Vietnamese air force, deploying more modern fighters.[274]

The timing of the operation was strategically premeditated. Beijing intended to capitalize on the Vietnamese military's deployment in Cambodia to initiate its military campaign, aiming to deliver to Hanoi an initial shock. With a total force of 600,000 troops, the Vietnamese army had deployed 150,000 to 200,000 soldiers in Cambodia to secure the territory in the weeks following December 25th. Consequently, only 200,000 to 250,000 troops remained available in northern Vietnam to defend against a potential incursion.[275]

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[269] K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", gives an estimation of 330.000 troops. However, the figures change from volume to volume. For example, E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, has an estimate of 472.000 units. The higher calculation is given by X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 90-91: "more than half a million combatants".

[270] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, p. 53.

[271] K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", pp. 9-12.

[272] *Ivi*, p. 12. The airplanes deployed for the operations were 28 MIG-21 560 MIG-19 98 MIG-17 120 F-9, and 142 other planes. The book E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* gives a near figure of 800-900, p. 51.

[273] *Ivi*, p. 10. The PLAAF had about 400.000 men and 5.000 military planes, mostly MIG-15's, MIG-17's, and MIG-19's, with only 80 MIG-21's

[274] *Ivi*, p. 13. The Vietnamese Air Force was composed of approximately 300 combat aircraft, including "70 MiG-19s, 70 MiG-21s, and some American-made F-5s captured in 1975". However, although the PLAAF also operated MiG aircraft, the Vietnamese fleet benefited from more advanced electronic systems. Chinese planes faced significant vulnerabilities against Hanoi's extensive network of Soviet-built surface-to-air missiles and radar-guided anti-aircraft batteries.

[275] K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", p. 13

On February 17, just before dawn, the PLA launched its operation with a massive artillery barrage, followed by a first contingent of 100,000 troops crossing the border. The primary objective of this initial phase was to capture of Cao Bang and Lang Son from the eastern front and Lao Cai from the western front as quickly as possible.[276] Achieving this required precise coordination among eleven armies, advancing through twenty-six separate entry points along the border.

However, the advance of PLA came into the first obstacles. Logistical shortcomings emerged as one of the most critical and immediate challenges, already in the pre-operative phase. This was a problem foreseeable in some peripherical counties of Guanxi, with such massive army stationed there.[277] As the operation started several units quickly found themselves without essential supplies, undermining their operational effectiveness.[278] Also the PLAAF experienced problems regarding the infrastructure, limiting its potential functions.[279]

This logistic severe problems should be considered also in light of the topographical nature of the target areas. The territories near the boundaries featured rugged hills, narrow valleys, and dense vegetation. These natural obstacles slowed down the movement of Chinese troops and hindered the efficient transport of supplies, resulting in bottlenecks that prevented rapid advances. Additionally, the Vietnamese leveraged their intimate knowledge of the terrain to set up effective ambushes and defensive positions.[280] Furthermore, the PLA was not equipped with the latest logistic equipment, but used prevalently donkeys, horses and old trucks.[281]

The Vietnamese army fought surprisingly well, defending strongholds in the hilly terrain near the border while simultaneously preparing for a major confrontation with the slowed and weakened Chinese forces in the plains near key urban centers. The *modus operandi* was the same adopted in the previous 30 years: trenches, tunnels, and defensive structures were rapidly constructed to fortify positions and hinder the Chinese advance.[282]

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[276] C. M. GIN, *How China Wins: A Case Study of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War*, Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2015; K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", pp. 14-19; X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, p. 90.

[277] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, p. 59. For instance, Longzhou and Jingxi were not served by a railroad, complicating the operation even before this started.

[278] *Ivi*, pp. 70-71. "For example, three days after the invasion began, the 150 men of the 3rd Company of PLA Unit 53203 were down to a total, across the company, of eight individual meals. U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency calculations indicate that the unit should have had more than 1,000 rations on hand at that point in the operation".

[279] C. M. GIN, *How China Wins: A Case Study of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War*, pp. 57-58. The author captured this perfectly with an interview with a former PLAAF officer stationed in Yunnan province: "he recalls how the concentration of up to five different aircraft at airports built to handle only three would have made logistics and timely ground support difficult if they had been called to fight".

[280] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, pp. 46-49.

[281] K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", p. 15.

[282] *Ivi*, pp. 15-16.

On one hand, the Vietnamese army drew from its military tradition and operational doctrine, employing the defensive guerrilla tactics mentioned above.[283] On the other, the PLA conducted the war in line with Maoist military doctrine, with wave attacks being central in the Chinese offensive.[284] This approach required a high tolerance for casualties and the maintenance of morale among the troops.

In boosting the morale, the Chinese leadership employed a complex approach. The PLA relied heavily on political indoctrination, with political commissars embedded in units to constantly remind soldiers of the patriotic nature of their mission. Propaganda was pervasive: state media and official communications framed the conflict as a righteous struggle against imperialism, urging troops to accept high casualty rates as a necessary sacrifice for national rejuvenation.[285]

Furthermore, there was a significant element of achievements-based motivation in the PLA, deeply intertwined with political loyalty and ideological conformity. The performance of the troops was closely monitored by party committees and political commissars. Good performance could lead to tangible rewards such as promotions, better assignments, increased responsibilities, and improved pay, while poor performance might result in disapproval or relegation to less desirable tasks. This mechanism was designed not only to incentivize military effectiveness but also to ensure that soldiers and cadres remained ideologically aligned with Maoist principles.[286]

These factors added to the huge numerical advantage, brought the PLA to advance although navigating through the opening problems. On February 26, the Chinese managed in seizing the three provincial capitals: Cao Bang, Lang Son and Lao Cai.[287] With the initial objective achieved the first phase of the operation was concluded (February 17-26). As expected, this approach came at the cost of significant casualties.[288]

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[283] C. M. GIN, *How China Wins: A Case Study of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War*, p. 58. The tactics aimed to fight "on familiar ground while coaxing an enemy to overstretch themselves", taken from the Vietnamese ancient military master Nguyen Trai, who fought and won the Ming army in the XV century.

[284] *Ibidem*.

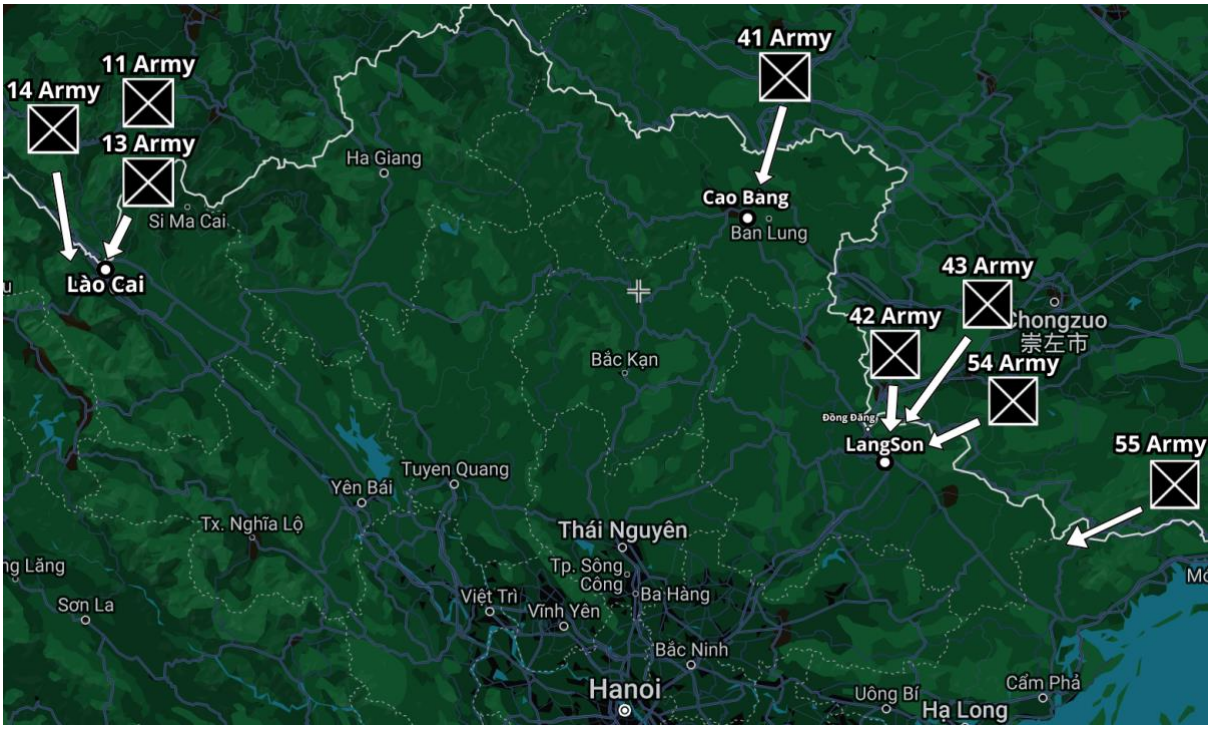
[285] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, pp. 16-21. Key concepts such as the "three major tasks", the "three major principles of political work", the "three democracies", and the "three–eight formula" were central in the indoctrination of the PLA.

[286] *Ivi*, pp. 14-16.

[287] C. M. GIN, *How China Wins: A Case Study of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War*, p. 58.

[288] K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", p. 18. However, "as both sides made different claims, accounts of the fighting became contradictory", especially during the conflict.

Figure 1. Map of the Offensive Movements of the Chinese Armies in the 1979 Campaign against Vietnam.



Sources: Created by the author referencing to the volumes K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis"; E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War.*

3.2 International Implications

How did the major powers, particularly the Soviet Union and the United States, responded to the conflict? Washington, aware of the invasion before initiated, acted as a potential mediator. The State Department stated the opposition of the U.S. against any kind of aggression, inviting the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia and the Chinese to withdraw from Vietnam.[289] The United States found itself in a difficult position, unable to take a decisive stance. On one hand, it sought to maintain its promising relationship with the PRC, while on the other, it aimed to prevent the conflict from escalating, fearing that Moscow might intervene forcefully, turning the crisis into a wider war.[290]

[289] B. GWERTZMAN, "Soviet Is Cautioned: Washington Bids Moscow Take No Military Step to Back Hanoi Ally", *New York Times*, February 18, 1979, pp. 1, 10.

[290] D. K. SHIPLER, "Soviet Terse in Invasion Report, Implying No Decision on Action", *New York Times*, February 18, 1979, p. 10. In particular, this article gives centrality to the Article 6 of the Friendship Treaty: "if one of the sides becomes the object of attack or of a threat of attack, the contracting parties will quickly move to mutual consultations with the goal of removing the threat and the taking of appropriate effective measures for the preservation of the peace and security of their countries".

From the moment the Soviet Union received news of the invasion, marked by the release of the first bulletin at 8:00 PM Moscow Time, it immediately expressed solidarity with Vietnam through both institutional and semi-institutional channels of communication. The political observer Vitaly Korionov condemned the Chinese attack on *Pravda* as a "brazen act of aggression" aimed at "weakening the eastern flank of global socialism". He further asserted that "heroic Vietnam" was "fully capable of defending itself", emphasizing the nation's resilience against external threats. The political message was reinforced: China was portrayed as a traitor to the communist cause, while Vietnam was depicted as a valiant and loyal ally.[291]

Moscow strengthened its position in the following days. On the 18th the Kremlin stated urging China to "stop before it is too late",[292] setting a tone that was moderate yet unmistakably threatening. However, subsequent communications in early March reinforced this stance with a more pointed deterrent. A leading commentator in state-run media reiterated that "The Chinese aggressors … must know that the more crimes they commit, the more severe will be the retribution for them".[293]

On February 23, Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia addressed to UN Security Council the joint draft resolution S/13117, condemning China's military aggression against Vietnam. The resolution calls for an immediate withdrawal of Chinese troops from Vietnamese territory, demands that all UN member states cease arms and military technology transfers to China, insists on China's strict respect for Vietnam's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, and seeks full compensation for the material damages inflicted on Vietnam.[294]

Simultaneously, Moscow dispatched a Sverdlov-class cruiser and a Krivak-class destroyer to the South China Sea, reinforcing the 11 naval vessels already stationed off the coast of Vietnam. Moreover, the Soviets managed to increase military aid through an airlift operation, utilizing Bulgarian flights from Calcutta to Hanoi.[295]

Investigating further into China's intentions and actions at this stage reveals the strategic depth of Beijing's plan and its true objectives, particularly in relation to Moscow's reactions, which had been anticipated by the Chinese Politburo. A key piece of evidence supporting this

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[291] P. BUSCH, "Comrades at War: Soviet Radio Broadcasting During the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War", *Media History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2019, pp. 7-8.

[292] K. C. CHEN, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, Hoover Press, Stanford, 1987, p. 108.

[293] P. BUSCH, "Comrades at War: Soviet Radio Broadcasting During the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War", *Media History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2019, pp. 7-8.

[294] UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, *Czechoslovakia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: Draft Resolution*, Document S/13117-EN, February 23, 1979, accessed February 27, 2025. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/2195?ln=en&v=pdf

[295] K. C. CHEN, "China's War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis", p. 19-20.

is the specific order to restrict the PLAAF's operations to Chinese territory, allowing intervention in Vietnamese airspace only if deemed "necessary" to support ground forces.[296]

Moreover, preventive actions were taken in order to be able to face an eventual escalation. In December 1978 a Northern Front created under the central commandership, in addition to the Southern Front involved the invasion of Vietnam.[297] In the northeastern regions of China**,** 300,000 civilians were evacuated, and the Front was placed on high alert.[298] In the Hainan Island, naval aviation units were ordered to monitor movements and activities of the Soviet navy in the South Chinese Sea.[299]

3.3 The last phase of war

Already during the first days of war, Chinese officials, including Deng Xiaoping, repeatedly anticipated that the Punitive War was a limited operation in both time and scope. Deng first stated on February 19 that China would withdraw after achieving its objectives, later reiterating to Western diplomats and media, estimating an end within ten days. As K. C. Chen suggests, those declarations were voluntarily publicly disclosed to "dissuade the Soviet Union from intervening" and put at ease the U.S., by now a strategic partner of Beijing.[300]

Despite penetrating the urban areas of key towns, the PLA did not fully secure the three provincial capitals. Lang Son, in particular, was only completely seized on March 4, following the consolidation of control over the surrounding hills.[301] Meanwhile, Hanoi launched a new conscription campaign to strengthen its northern front. However, only limited troop movements from Cambodia were recorded, suggesting that Vietnam largely refrained from redirecting significant forces from its southern operations to confront China.[302] The lack of a Vietnamese

[296] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, p. 76.

[297] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, p. 53; K. C. CHEN, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, p. 115.

[298] K. C. CHEN, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, p. 115.

[299] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, p. 76.

[300] K. C. CHEN, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, p. 109. Deng first conveyed this message on February 19 in a conversation with Alejandro Orfila, Secretary-General of the Organization of American States. The message was reiterated on February 23, when Geng Biao told a Western ambassador that the war would last "about another week, maybe a little more". That same day, Deng Xiaoping echoed similar statements to Roy Jenkins, chairman of the European Economic Community, and to Takeji Watanabe, president of Kyodo News, specifying that the fighting would conclude within "about ten days" or "a few days more". On February 25, Wang Zhen, a deputy premier, restated this position at a banquet with British Industry Minister Eric Varley, adding that China had no intention of advancing toward Hanoi.

[301] *Ivi*, p. 110-111; C. M. GIN, How China Wins: A Case Study of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, p. 58.

[302] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, p. 72. A new set of conscription criteria was enforced: the local party committees began screening volunteers and potential

retreat from Cambodia, even at this early stage, signaled a preliminary failure of Beijing's broader strategic objective. The tactical objectives were achieved, but they failed to fulfill the broader strategic aims.

As planned and publicly announced in the early days of the invasion, the PLA began its withdrawal on March 5. During this final phase, Chinese forces systematically destroyed infrastructure, including bridges, roads, and key buildings.[303] While Hanoi, despite its deep resentment, allowed the withdrawal to proceed in pursuit for the "good will for peace".[304]

The withdrawal was completed only by March 16, marking the end of the short war. According to K. Chen, who compiled figures from a mix of Chinese military reports and Western sources, the losses indicate 26,000 Chinese and 30,000 Vietnamese killed**,** along with thousands wounded and captured. Equipment losses also varied, with China losing more armored vehicles, while Vietnam lost more artillery and missile stations. The diversity of sources and the political sensitivity of the conflict suggest that these numbers should be taken as approximate rather than absolute. [305]

The military operation was configured as a game of bridge, where each player, before the start of the game, already had a well-defined "contract". Similarly, the Chinese army was given specific, measured objectives, and once the "cards were dealt", it was not required to operate outside that predetermined framework. Just as in a game where the outcome is determined by the rules and the cards received, the military strategy was limited to executing the plan without the need to improvise further maneuvers. The danger of a Russian intervention was kept under observation and simultaneously disincentivized, while the Americans were reassured and, at the same time, Vietnam was intimidated to withdraw from Kampuchea.

However, as anticipated, this last objective, the most important in the short term, was not accomplished. Vietnam did not withdraw from Kampuchea and will not withdraw until September 1989.[306]

conscripts. Men from the age of eighteen to forty-five and women from the age of eighteen to thirty- five were eligible for service.

[303] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 112-114.

[304] K. C. CHEN, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, pp. 110-111; C. M. GIN, How China Wins: A Case Study of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, p. 58.

[305] *Ivi*, table 5.1, p. 114.

[306] N. CHANDA, "Civil War in Cambodia?", no. 76, 1989, p. 31.

3.4 The long retreat

Beijing did not abandon its primary objective; on the contrary, the Chinese Vice Premier Geng Biao openly threatened Vietnam with a "second lesson".[307] With the benefit of retrospection, it may be tempting to interpret this as a mere bluff intended to intimidate Hanoi. However, this perspective must be weighed against the continued border clashes and skirmishes that persisted in the years following 1979.

First, the Cambodian conflict dragged on for over a decade, inevitably entangling both China and Vietnam in a prolonged struggle. Secondly, a series of low-intensity clashes erupted along the Sino-Vietnamese border, a period that E. O'Dowd aptly describes as "artillery diplomacy"—a strategy in which intermittent bombardments and skirmishes served as both military pressure and a political signaling tool in the evolving regional balance.[308]

In those years the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) continued to aggressively increase the pressure in Cambodia taking gradually the majority of territory of the region.[309] Aware of the incumbent Chinese threat, Hanoi deployed strongly increased the military personnel on the northern borders. Beijing started adopting the shelling as a pressure element in the summer of 1980, merely with a symbolic impact, without no impact on the Vietnamese campaign on Cambodia.[310]

In 1981, the PLA launched new offensives along the Sino-Vietnamese border. In May, multiple Chinese assaults targeted strategic hill positions near Lang Son. Though these clashes were not large-scale engagements, they resulted in hundreds of casualties on both sides.[311] This pattern of skirmishes culminated with its peak with the Laoshan Offensive in 1984, second only to the 1979 operation.[312]

During the operation, Chinese forces implemented a combination of frontal assaults, targeted infiltrations, and extensive artillery barrages aimed at disorganizing Vietnamese defensive lines. Leveraging their numerical superiority, they sought to capture key terrain positions, effectively cutting off Vietnamese communication and supply routes. The strategy relied on coordinated multi-front attacks, utilizing flanking maneuvers to strike at less-defended areas, while massive artillery bombardments. The violent pressure forced Hanoi to constantly readjust

[307] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, p. 89.
[308] *Ivi*, pp. 89-107.
[309] N. CHANDA, "Civil War in Cambodia?" *Foreign Policy*, no. 76, 1989.
[310] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, p. 91.
[311] *Ivi*, p. 94.
[312] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 148-152.

its defenses and redistribute its resources over an extensive frontline.[313] The prolonged border tensions, similar in execution and intent, created sustained military and psychological pressure on Hanoi, pushing it to loosen its grip on Cambodia.

The last significant clash between China and Vietnam occurred in 1988 over the disputed Spratly Islands. By that time, China had already established an "oceanic observation station" on Fiery Cross Reef and sought to expand further toward Johnson Reef. As part of this effort, the Chinese navy engaged Vietnamese naval vessels conducting a supply mission in the area. The confrontation resulted in two Vietnamese ships being damaged and another completely destroyed, leading to the loss of 75 Vietnamese men.[314]

This last confrontation, though part of the broader pattern of China's territorial skirmishes with its neighbors, is plausibly tied to the context of the Third Indochina War, if only for the notable use of force, which set it apart from other disputes of its kind.[315]

In an ever-evolving international context, the low-intensity conflict was nearing its conclusion by the late 1980s. In the same year as the Spratly Islands incident, the Soviet Union took a step back during the UN General Assembly's annual meeting, reaching a compromise with Beijing on the Cambodian issue. A temporary framework led by Prince Sihanouk was set to take effect once Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia. On one hand, this arrangement anticipated the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, on the other, it could have allowed the Khmer Rouge to participate in a potential future Cambodian government.[316] This last hypothesis was even supported by the United States until 1990.[317]

Riding this wave of optimism, negotiations between China and Vietnam began at Vietnam's initiative. China recognized that the rapprochement was largely influenced by Soviet pressure on Vietnam, as Moscow sought to ease regional tensions and improve its own relations with Beijing. However, regardless of the external dynamics at play, China ultimately secured its key strategic objective: the Vietnamese army's withdrawal Cambodia.[318]

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[313] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, pp. 98-105.

[314] R. AMER, "Sino-Vietnamese Border Disputes", in B. A. ELLEMAN, S. KOTKIN, C. SCHOFIELD (eds.), *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbors in Asia*, p. 296.

[315] B. A. ELLEMAN, S. KOTKIN, C. SCHOFIELD (eds.), *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbors in Asia*.

[316] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 200-202.

[317] B. WOMACK, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, p. 208. Only on July 18, 1990, the Secretary of State James Baker announced that the United States would no longer support the three-party coalition, containing the Khmer Rouge in the UN.

[318] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 201.

Gorbachev's[319] visit to Beijing in May 1989, the first by a Soviet leader in 30 years,[320] and the fall of the Berlin Wall in November provide the ultimate coordinates for understanding the normalization process between China and Vietnam, which was already underway and nearing its conclusion, with the complete withdrawal from Cambodia by the same year.

With Hanoi orphan of the Soviet Unions, Beijing skillfully leveraged the situation to maintain pressure and negotiate from a position of strength, in particular, facing the issue of the composition of Cambodia's future government, the role of the United Nations in the transition, and the conditions for Sino-Vietnamese normalization.[321]

China demanded the Khmer Rouge to be included in Cambodia's transitional government, a prospect firmly opposed by both Hanoi and the pro-Vietnamese government in Phnom Penh, which feared a resurgence of the Khmer Rouge. Vietnam saw China's proposal as unbalanced, since was favoring antigovernment forces over the existing Cambodian leadership. Beijing, supported by the United States, insisted that the issue be resolved under UN supervision through the establishment of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).[322]

During the Chengdu Meeting in September 1990, Chinese leaders remained firm, demanding that Hanoi accept the UN-backed political framework before any normalization. Initially resistant, Vietnam ultimately conceded and, in 1991, accepted the Paris Peace Plan, formalized on October 23, which placed Cambodia's political transition under UN supervision.[323] After 13 years of skirmishes and small military conflicts the Third War Indochina came to an end.

3.5 From Battlefield Lessons to Military Reform

As is often the case in conflicts of this nature—short-lived combats without a decisive champion—both sides declared military victory and claimed success in achieving their respective objectives. The Chinese government publicly declared that it had "achieved the

[319] Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022) was the last leader of the Soviet Union, serving as General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1985 to 1991. His policies of Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring) aimed to reform the Soviet system but ultimately contributed to its collapse. In foreign policy, he pursued détente, normalized relations with China, and reduced Soviet support for Vietnam, leading to Hanoi's economic reforms and withdrawal from Cambodia.

[320] "Gorbachev Visits Beijing for Start of Summit Talks", *New York Times*, May 15, 1989, pp. 1, 8.

[321] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 202-210.

[322] *Ibidem.*

[323] *Ibidem*.

expected objectives".[324] Similarly, in Vietnam, there is a widely held belief that the army successfully repelled the Chinese invaders, a narrative that remains prevalent to this day.[325]

However, even if the PLA outnumbered the Vietnamese forces and took them by surprise, the offensive faced significant challenges. Logistical shortcomings and outdated equipment hindered mobility and resupply, while rigid, ideologically driven command structures limited tactical flexibility.[326] In this regard, the war served as a testing ground for the Chinese army and a catalyst for recognizing its limitations, a notion reinforced by an article in the *PLA Daily* titled *"*Transforming the Self-Defense Counterattack Experiences into the Treasury of the Whole Army*"*.[327]

Deng himself was aware of the serious limitations that emerged from the Vietnamese experience: «Can our army...deal with any emergency? I don't mean an emergency like the self-defensive counter-attack on Viet Nam. That kind of incident is easy to cope with. What I mean is: if we should be confronted with a more powerful adversary than Viet Nam».[328] The leader of PRC, plausibly for this reason, swiftly directed Foreign Minister Huang Hua to initiate talks with the Soviet Union to resolve outstanding disputes, strengthen bilateral relations, and formalize agreements through official treaties.[329]

One primary problem was the rigidity of the system, evident in the field promotions of many cadres, particularly in the Guangzhou Military Region, where high casualties forced the rapid replacement of fallen commanders. Lacking proper tactical training, these newly promoted

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[324] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, p. 112; THE CENTRAL PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, "中国军事大事记 (1979年)" (Major Military Events in China, 1979), April 22, 2009, accessed March 5, 2025, https://www.gov.cn/test/2009-04/22/content_1292368.htm#:~:text=1979.

[325] "Northern Border Defence War: Victory and Lessons", *VietnamPlus*, February 15, 2019, accessed March 11, 2025, https://en.vietnamplus.vn/northern-border-defence-war-victory-and-lessons-post146642.vnp#:~:text=Vietnam%E2%80%99s%20military%20and%20people%20putout,interests%20on%20the%20Indochinese%20peninsula; L. M. NAM, "Dấu ấn trong chặng đường 80 năm của Quân đội ta – Bài 3: Chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới, chủ quyền biển đảo của Tổ quốc và hoàn thành nhiệm vụ quốc tế" (*Milestones in the 80-Year Journey of Our Army – Part 3: Fighting to Defend Borders, National Sovereignty over Seas and Islands, and Fulfilling International Missions*), *Quân Đội Nhân Dân*, December 17, 2024, accessed March 11, 2025, https://www.qdnd.vn/vung-buoc-duoi-quan-ky-quyet-thang/lich-su-quan-doi-nhan-dan-viet-nam/dau-an-trong-chang-duong-80-nam-cua-quan-doi-ta-bai-3-chien-dau-bao-ve-bien-gioi-chu-quyen-bien-dao-cua-to-quoc-va-hoan-thanh-nhiem-vu-quoc-te-807100#:~:text=Trong%20khi%20%C4%91%C3%B3%2C%20%E1%BB%9F%20bi%C3%AAn,ph%E1%BA%A3i%20r%C3%BAt%20qu%C3%A2n%20v%E1%BB%81%20n%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Bc.

[326] K. C. CHEN, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, pp. 110-111; X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991,* p. 115-140.

[327] *Jiefangjun bao*, 11 April 1979 in X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, p. 115.

[328] Y. EVRON, *China's Military Procurement in the Reform Era: The Setting of New Directions*, ePub edition, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2016, p. 133.

[329] E. F. VOGEL, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge/London, 2011, p. 536.

leaders struggled to make quick and adaptive decisions in combat, representing an obstacle in the chain of command.[330]

Additionally, ideological interference, rooted in Maoist principles, prioritized political loyalty over operational flexibility. Rather than swiftly adapting strategies in response to changing battlefield conditions, officers had to follow pre-established ideological guidelines.[331] For instance, during the Battle of Lang Son, the PLA used artillery at extremely close ranges (150–200 meters) following Maoist doctrine that prioritized immediate annihilation over precision and operational safety. This outdated approach compromised accuracy and endangered troops. Only the timely intervention of frontline officers, who corrected firing calculations, improved artillery effectiveness and support for the infantry.[332]

Moreover, the 484th Regiment's annihilation exposed the failure of ideological training to compensate for military incompetence. Ambushed at Ban Mau, north of Cao Bang, its officers lost control, failed to coordinate a defense or withdrawal, and abandoned their troops to chaos. The result was devastating—half the battalion was killed or wounded. In its post-battle assessment, the 162nd Division condemned the unit's leadership for cowardice, underscoring the futility of political indoctrination without genuine military proficiency.[333]

All these failures stemmed from the broader Maoist concept of "People's War", which Deng inherited from his predecessor. Even if it was effective in contrasting the Japanese occupation 40 years before, in the more technologically advanced warfare of the Deng era this was obsolete. This vulnerability was present in all the three branches: the Chinese Navy, the PLA, and the PLAAF.[334]

During the 1980s, Deng launched a comprehensive military reform aimed at reducing the size of the PLA while simultaneously enhancing its quality through modernization. The goal was to develop a professional army modeled after Western forces while rationalizing its bureaucratic and political structures. By 1985–1986, the PLA's personnel was reduced by 25%, significantly cutting its size and the military regions were reduced from 11 to 7.[335]

The modernization was facilitated by the rapid increase of military exchange with the U.S. both in material and knowledge. It assisted in the construction of an artillery munitions factory

[330] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, pp. 111-114.
[331] K. C. CHEN, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, chs. 3, 4.
[332] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, p. 87.
[333] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, p. 130.
[334] E. F. VOGEL, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge/London, 2011, pp. 523-534.
[335] J. T. DREYER, "Deng Xiaoping and Modernization of the Chinese Military", *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1988, pp. 215–231.

and provided an avionics upgrade for the F-8 fighter, granting it all-weather capability, and several updated equipment.[336] This was paralleled with and exchanges of academic experts and training missions.[337]

While China recognized significant military failures, Vietnam was pleased by the performance of the PAVN. The troop experience, reliability, and effectiveness of its long-standing strategic principles (fortified defenses, aggressive engagement, decentralized warfare, and guerrilla tactics) proved successful against China.[338]

Nonetheless, on the Vietnamese side, the post-1979 military assessments highlighted an underestimation of Chinese military engagement and exposed significant shortcomings in Vietnam's own preparedness. Publicly, the leadership maintained a heroic narrative centered on local soldier exploits and border defenses, but internally it was acknowledged that rapid mobilization capabilities were limited, and that severe organizational and logistical weaknesses had resulted in substantial human and material losses.[339]

Moreover, the intensified military focus on two fronts was overly expensive. The enormous allocation of resources to defense deepened an already critical domestic economic crisis, fueling internal conflicts between the "military-first" faction and the "economy-first" faction.[340]Although this militarization proved effective in enhancing immediate national defense, it also underscored the need for comprehensive structural reforms, especially in the economic field.[341]

The prolonged war's costs, combined with the political and military collapse of the Soviet Union, led Vietnam to reassess its Cambodian strategy and the economic-military structure of its system. Similarly, while China pursued military modernization, it did so as a secondary priority to economic growth, reducing the military budget's proportion[342] and focusing on structural reforms. Modernization efforts remained limited to high-priority sectors, such as

[336] J. T. DREYER, "Deng Xiaoping and Modernization of the Chinese Military", p. 218-219. The U.S. supplied Sikorsky helicopters, Raytheon 12E I167 sonar, Mark 46 Mod 2 torpedoes, and five LM 2500 gas turbines for the Chinese navy's destroyers.

[337] E. F. VOGEL, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, p. 540.

[338] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 131-132

[339] K. PATH, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking During the Third Indochina War*, pp. 90-94.

[340] *Ivi*, pp. 7-10.

[341] *Ivi*, pp. 167-198.

[342] E. F. VOGEL, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, p. 541. The "Chinese military expenditures were 4.6 percent of GNP in 1979 when the reforms began, but declined continuously to 1.4 percent of GNP by 1991". However, the present figures should be considered in light of a sharp increase of the GNP. The book Y. EVRON, *China's Military Procurement in the Reform Era: The Setting of New Directions*, Table 5.1 suggests that while the military budget in CNY remained relatively static until 1985, its proportion of GDP declined, indicating a shift in economic priorities.

missiles, satellites, and submarines. As Deng Xiaoping stated: «It appears that at least for ten years there will not be a large-scale war in the world. We don't need to be in such a hurry. Now the number of troops is too large. We have to cut back... We don't need to prepare all things. We need to pick a small number of projects and focus on them».[343]

Even with different timelines and motivations, both China and Vietnam prioritized economic modernization by the end of the Cold War, shifting military expansion—and the armed threat—to a secondary concern. In China, Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations placed defense last, emphasizing agriculture, industry, and technology as the primary drivers of national progress.[344] Meanwhile, Vietnam recognized that a two-front war was unsustainable, and that economic development was essential for long-term stability.[345] Viewed in this way, the Sino-Vietnamese War marked the moment when a new path was initially considered, becoming later a point of convergence for both countries.

3.6 Economic reforms and the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations

The Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, a key reformist in the Vietnamese Politburo, outlined the new perspective in a comprehensive foreign affairs report to the National Assembly in 1986. He emphasized Vietnam's overreliance on Soviet aid, which had doubled in 1981–1985 but failed to compensate for the country's economic stagnation. Meanwhile, China's growing economic influence in socialist markets, offering cheaper, better-quality goods, posed a direct challenge to Vietnam's exports.[346]

These realities underscored the urgency of reform, setting the stage for the Sixth Party Congress, which embraced *Doi Moi* (renovation): a vision of new thinking, open democracy, and economic renewal. In December 1986, during the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Van Linh was appointed as the new Secretary General.[347] With this change at the head of Vietnam a new paradigm emerged.

The *Doi Moi* consisted in a radical economic reform aimed at transforming Vietnam's centralized system into a "socialist-oriented market economy". Key measures included ending direct subsidies, abolishing price controls, shifting to cash-based wages, and liberalizing input

[343] E. F. VOGEL, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, p. 540. These words come from a Deng speech at the Military Commission on Science and Technology on March 19, 1979,
[344] *Ivi*, pp. 540-541.
[345] K. PATH, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking During the Third Indochina War*, pp. 90-94.
[346] *Ivi*, pp. 198-199.
[347] D. WURFEL, "Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective", in W. S. TURLEY, M. SELDEN (eds.), *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism: Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2019.

costs for state enterprises. Deregulation in trade facilitated exchanges and foreign investment by removing internal checkpoints.[348] As result, Vietnam's GDP grew at an average annual rate of 5% between 1986 and 1991.[349]

This can be seen as a process of economic liberalization, though not in the Western sense of the term. In Vietnam, it was a reform that sought to integrate market mechanisms and competition while maintaining state control and a socialist orientation, adapting to the country's historical, cultural, and political specificities. This "Eastern" approach is distinctive in its attempt to balance economic openness with Vietnam's political and social traditions.[350]

This process was comparable to the Chinese economic reforms, but here some differences emerged. Vietnam was economically dependent upon Soviet Union and, with its fall, was in a severe crisis of food production.[351] This was partially the goal of the isolation orchestrated by Beijing with the Third War of Indochina, which was ultimately successful in the long run.

Beijing, on contrast, already at the end of the '70s was becoming an actor with strong connections with the outside world. In January 1980, the U.S. Senate approved most-favored-nation status for China, effectively halving tariffs from 20% to 10.5%.[352] This marked the end of three decades of embargo and trade barriers, laying the foundation for a rapid increase in bilateral trade, which surged from $2 billion in 1979 to $20 billion by 1990.[353]

Starting from the premise that economic growth would strengthen both his position and the party's role, and rejecting Mao's personality cult, Deng Xiaoping initiated sweeping economic reforms and established a system of "democratic centralism". This model combined centralized decision-making with internal party debate, where discussions were permitted, but once a decision was made, all members were expected to adhere to it.[354]

During the "Standing Firm" period (1989–1992), Deng faced both internal and external pressures, balancing international scrutiny with the need to reassure the Chinese people and maintain political and economic stability.[355] Amid the collapse of communist regimes in

[348] W. S. TURLEY, M. SELDEN (eds.), *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism: Doi Moi in Comparative*. Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2019.

[349] WORLD BANK, *Vietnam - GDP Growth (Annual %)*, accessed March 8, 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=VN.

[350] B. WOMACK, "Political Reform and Political Change in Communist Countries: Implications for Vietnam", in W. S. TURLEY, M. SELDEN (eds.), *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism: Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective*.

[351] *Ivi*, pp. 279-290.

[352] "China Gets Favored Trade Status", *New York Times*, January 25, 1980, p. 8.

[353] D. WANG, "China's Trade Relations with the United States in Perspective", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2010, pp. 165–210. https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261003900307. In millions of current US dollars.

[354] E. F. VOGEL, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, pp. 377-385.

[355] *Ivi*, p. 640-659.

Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, he repeatedly emphasized his guiding principle: "observe calmly, hold your ground, respond soberly, and take action".[356]

Both Vietnam and China adopted reforms that transformed their economic trajectories, accelerating the shift in response to the end of the Cold War. Both transitioned into rapidly growing open markets, seeking foreign investment and deeper integration into the global economy. For instance, in June 1992, the CPV Politburo strongly supported the policy of differentiating and expanding the country's foreign economic relations, boosting the *Doi Moi*.[357]

With these new rules, normalization became the next logical step. In the wake of Tiananmen[358], Beijing sought to restore its international credibility,[359] while Hanoi aimed to secure stable ties with its principal neighbor, China.[360] Both prioritized peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution to stabilize relations, particularly through trade and economic cooperation.

In 1991, China accounted for only 0.8% of Vietnam's total imports, but by 2013, this figure had surged to 28%, making China Vietnam's largest trading partner.[361] As economic interdependence grew, so did concerns over Vietnam's trade deficit with China, raising fears of economic vulnerability.[362] This economic entanglement, while fostering cooperation, also underscored the shifting power dynamics between the two former adversaries. With China emerging as Vietnam's dominant trade partner, questions arose as to whether the long and costly conflict had truly achieved its intended goals.

3.7 A war without winners?

Were the objectives of the war achieved in the long term? Partially. The conflict yielded some of China's desired outcomes, notably Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia and the

[356] E. F. VOGEL, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, p. 646. "First, we should observe the situation coolly. Second, we should hold our ground. Third, we should act calmly. Don't be impatient. It is no good to be impatient. We should be calm, calm, and again calm, and quietly immerse ourselves in practical work to accomplish something—something for China".

[357] L. H. HIEP, *Living Next to the Giant: The Political Economy of Vietnam's Relations with China under Doi Moi*, ISEAS Publishing, Singapore, 2017, p. 73.

[358] The Tiananmen events of 1989 refer to the pro-democracy protests in Beijing, where thousands of students and citizens gathered in Tiananmen Square demanding political reform. The movement, which lasted from April to early June, ended on June 4, 1989, when the Chinese government imposed martial law and used military force to suppress the demonstrations. The crackdown resulted in a still-debated number of casualties and remains a highly censored topic in China.

[359] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, pp. 208-209.

[360] L. H. HIEP, *Living Next to the Giant: The Political Economy of Vietnam's Relations with China under Doi Moi*, ISEAS Publishing, Singapore, 2017, p. 72-73.

[361] *Ivi,* Table 5.2, p. 101.

[362] *Ivi*, p. 118.

reassertion of Chinese dominance in Southeast Asia. Additionally, China successfully positioned itself as a strategic counterweight to the Soviet Union. However, these results were largely influenced by the end of the Cold War paradigm, of which the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war was one of the most unpredicted ramifications.

That said, what was the legacy of the events analyzed? The Third Indochina War and the 1979 operation remain crucial turning points for both countries. The prolonged strain of military engagement on two fronts proved economically unsustainable for Vietnam, indirectly acting as a catalyst for *Doi Moi* reforms. By the late 1980s, the Soviet Union's diminishing power meant that Vietnam could no longer rely on Moscow for economic sustenance, forcing a strategic shift that reshaped its political and economic trajectory.

However, despite being a secondary actor, China successfully positioned itself as a strategic counterweight to the Soviet Union. Without the decoupling between the two communist giants, the Cold War would have taken a different course: the war in Vietnam was an integral part of this strategy.

While Deng initiated the war, considering its military implications, it ultimately became the final major act of Maoist doctrine, exposing its limitations and highlighting the need for a new strategic direction across all aspects of the Chinese system. Plausibly, the war itself was the first crack in an aging fortress, revealing that brute force alone was no longer a sustainable pillar for governing the Middle Kingdom. Like a tower built on shifting sands, Maoist military doctrine proved ill-equipped to support China's rising ambitions in a rapidly changing world.

The conflict exposed the fragility of relying on sheer numbers and ideological rigidity, signaling that economic strength and strategic diplomacy—not outdated battlefield tactics—would be the true foundation of China's future dominance. This is the great paradox of history: once communist brothers locked in war, China and Vietnam found peace not through shared ideology, but by embracing market economies and economic pragmatism.

The outcome of normalization, beyond economic cooperation—and perhaps reinforced by it—has been the gradual obsolescence of the war in the collective memory of both nations. This deliberate forgetting is reflected in the words of Jiang Zemin[363] in 1990: «Disasters are never powerful enough to separate true brothers; a smile is all they need to eliminate ingratitude and

[363] Jiang Zemin (1926–2022) was China's President (1993–2003) and General Secretary of the Communist Party (1989–2002), rising to power after the Tiananmen crackdown. He led China through economic expansion, strengthening ties with the West while maintaining strict political control. His leadership saw China's WTO accession (2001).

resentment».[364] In this perspective, both countries have produced few official reconstructions of the war, fearing that revisiting the conflict could strain relations between Hanoi and Beijing. However, in Vietnam, the narrative has recently begun to emerge from decades of silence, shifting the focus toward commemorating the heroism and sacrifice of those who defended the nation.[365]

China has systematically erased all traces of the Third Indochina War (1978–79) from its history books, memoirs, and encyclopedias—a conflict in which Beijing invaded Vietnam to defend the Khmer Rouge regime. From the 1990s onward, encyclopedic notes gradually reduced, omitting references to the Chinese attack and collaboration with Pol Pot, while military and diplomatic figures avoided mentioning the failed campaign in their writings. The result is a deliberate act of national amnesia, ensuring that this chapter of history remains buried from public memory.[366]

With the normalization, Beijing grasped the carrot-and-stick dynamic as a more effective tool of influence. In its new shape, the dragon reemerged as both a partner and a power, weaving economic interdependence to draw neighboring countries closer while keeping the latent threat of force ever-present, a silent reminder against defiance.

The war of 1979, then, was not merely a fleeting border conflict. It was a defining rupture, one that forced both nations to reassess their strategies, recalibrate their priorities, and ultimately shape the geopolitical architecture of modern Asia. The echoes of this transformation still resonate today, as China and Vietnam navigate a complex relationship of competition, economic interdependence, and latent mistrust—a relationship whose origins lie in the decisions made during and after the Third Indochina War. The short conflict had no clear winner, but its weight on history was undeniable.

[364] X. ZHANG, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, Jiang Zemin concluded the Chengdu summit in September 1990 with these words coming from a Qing poem.
[365] K. PATH, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking During the Third Indochina War*, p. 206.
[366] E. C. O'DOWD, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War*, pp. 160-162.

Conclusions

From the withdrawal of American forces from what was once South Vietnam, significant prevailing interpretations emerged: Vietnam won the war, and the United States lost it. Yet this military defeat prompted a critical reassessment of U.S. foreign policy in Asia, unfolding alongside Kissinger and Nixon's diplomatic initiative toward China. Together, these parallel developments fundamentally reshaped America's geopolitical standing, turning strategic failure into long-term diplomatic opportunity.

In 1954, President Eisenhower famously warned that if Vietnam fell to communism, it could set off "the beginning of a disintegration with the most profound consequences", causing countries to fall one after another, like dominoes toppling in succession.[367] Despite this dire predictions that guided America's entry into the conflict, the feared "domino effect" never materialized, underscoring the profound miscalculations that shaped U.S. policy in the region.

On the other hand, after the peace, prosperity did not arrive overnight. Indochina endured years of economic hardship and political realignment before embarking on a path of remarkable progress in the 1990s. What had seemed like a battleground of ideology was ultimately shaped by forces far more enduring—pragmatism, economic necessity, and strategic recalibration.

Vietnam's relationship with its Cold War allies reflected the same logic. The Soviet advisors who replaced the Americans were tolerated but never revered. To the fiercely independent Vietnamese, they were merely "Americans without dollars"[368]—a sardonic recognition that foreign influence was always transactional, never permanent. Hanoi had fought too long for sovereignty to trade one patron for another.

China was not so willing to let Vietnam go its own way. Their history was one of rivalry rather than solidarity, a lesson reinforced by war in 1979. The Sino-Vietnamese War was more than a punitive campaign—it was a declaration that China would not be sidelined in the region it sought to dominate. Yet, Vietnam never vacillated to the external pressures, holding firm to Ho Chi Minh's immortal words: "Nothing is more precious than independence and liberty".[369]

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[367] U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume XIII, Part 1, Indochina*, Document 716, "Memorandum of Discussion at the 186th Meeting of the National Security Council", Washington, July 8, 1954, accessed March 29, 2025, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v13p1/d716. At his news conference on April 7, 1954, President Eisenhower addressed the strategic significance of Indochina for the free world.

[368] S. KARNOW, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd revised and updated edition, Penguin Books, New York, 1997, p. 53. "Sneering at Russia, as "Americans without dollars", the Vietnamese circulated a joke that reflected their disappointment with Soviet stinginess and their own destitution".

[369] H. CHI MINH, *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66*, p. 342.

Between February 17 and March 16, 1979, China launched what would remain its last war to date until today, a campaign meant to weaken Hanoi in retaliation for Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. Despite its numerical advantage, the PLA struggled against Vietnam's battle-hardened troops, who had just expelled the United States and were masters of defensive warfare, guerrilla tactics, and unforgiving terrain.

After a month of brutal clashes, China declared victory and withdrew, leaving behind devastation but no strategic gains. Hanoi remained entrenched in Cambodia for over a decade. Instead of resolving tensions, the war deepened animosities, proving to be not just a clash of armies, but a test of aligning seamlessly with Clausewitz's definition of war.[370]

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam lost its most powerful benefactor, and the regional balance of power shifted decisively. China emerged as the dominant force in Southeast Asia, unchallenged in its ambitions, steadily extending its influence through economic expansion, political maneuvering, and military posturing. The war had failed to break Vietnam, but it had reinforced a larger reality. Beijing now was determined to shape the region's future without military means.

Yet, history is shaped by contradictions. The very forces that once drove China and Vietnam to war—power, survival, and ambition—became the foundation for their modern economic ties. Today, China is Vietnam's largest trading partner, while Hanoi has emerged as a vital hub for Chinese investment, with record-breaking trade flows in electronics, energy, and infrastructure.[371] The current Chinese leadership, under Xi Jinping, envisions a bilateral relationship that moves beyond historical grievances—one framed as a "community with a shared future"[372] built on mutual interdependence.

Still, economic interdependence cannot erase the weight of the past. The South China Sea remains a persistent fault line, where Hanoi continues to resist Beijing's expansive claims over the Spratly and Paracel Islands. While both governments have adopted a pragmatic approach to avoid open conflict, the dispute remains a source of tension: a reminder that behind growing economic cooperation lies an unresolved contest over sovereignty, influence, and historical memory.

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[370] K. VON CLAUSEWITZ, *Della Guerra*, p. 38. "War is not merely a political act, but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity, its prolongation by other means". *My translation*.

[371] OBSERVATORY OF ECONOMIC COMPLEXITY (OEC), *China and Vietnam - Bilateral Trade Profile*, accessed March 18, 2025, https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/vnm. With $220.7 billion in bilateral trade in 2023, China is Vietnam's largest trading partner.

[372] THE STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, "Xi Says Ready to Push for Building China-Vietnam Community with a Shared Future", *Xinhua*, January 18, 2025, accessed March 18, 2025.

Without delving too deeply into the topic, the Sino-Vietnamese War offers valuable insights into China's strategic approach toward Taiwan, an island whose fate could radically alter Hanoi's geopolitical orientation. Vietnam, a key regional player, would find itself at a crossroads in the event of a broader conflict, forced to navigate the delicate balance between economic pragmatism and strategic allegiance.

Historically, China's rulers sought harmony rather than conquest in dealing with external forces shaping their world. The Celestial Empire did not aspire to distant territories; it perceived itself as the center of the world, already possessing all it required. Modern Chinese leadership maintains this traditional perspective.

Where Western military strategy seeks to concentrate overwhelming force at the decisive moment, Sun Tzu's philosophy takes a different approach—one of psychological and political dominance, ensuring that victory is determined before battle is even fought. War, he wrote, "it is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin".[373] These are grave risks, demanding that caution precede action and that warfare itself is, above all, a psychological contest. As Sun Tzu famously stated, "supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting".[374]

Nothing in Sun Tzu's doctrine remains static; every strategy is in motion. The role of the strategist is to recognize the evolving balance of power and shape it to his advantage—to identify the *shi*, a concept as fluid as water flowing effortlessly down the mountainside, always seeking the most efficient path to the valley below.[375]

At its core, the renewed dialogue between Beijing and Hanoi rests on five fundamental principles: respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, mutual non-aggression, peaceful coexistence, and a commitment to equality and shared benefits.[376] More than diplomatic rhetoric, these principles reflect a pragmatic recognition that the past, though never forgotten, must not constrain the future. Yet, the enduring influence of historical memory remains unmistakably present, shaping not only current Sino-Vietnamese

[373] S. TZU, *The Art of War*, trans. with introduction and notes by L. GILES, Project Gutenberg Etext, May 19, 2004, p. 29.

[374] *Ivi*, p. 37.

[375] *Ivi*, pp. 58-59. The term "*shi*" (勢) is not used literally in this edition of Sun Tzu's Art of War; rather, it is an interpretative concept developed within Sinological tradition to describe the ever-evolving strategic momentum. Sun Tzu conveys this idea metaphorically when he states: «Military tactics are like water; water shapes its course according to the nature of the terrain... so too does the soldier shape victory in relation to the enemy». (Chapter 7) My formulation makes explicit what Sun Tzu leaves implicit—the fluidity and constant mutability of power dynamics—while remaining faithful to the core strategic essence of the original text.

[376] These fundamental principles, first introduced in 1954, have endured and continue to shape contemporary diplomatic relations. For a prior discussion on their significance and historical continuity, see page X, footnote X (to be defined).

interactions but also domestic discourses within both countries. In this delicate balance between pragmatic interdependence and unresolved historical grievances lies the very essence of their complex relationship. Ultimately, the Sino-Vietnamese experience reveals that while history may never truly end, it continuously evolves, intertwining past rivalries with present-day strategic recalibrations, forever shaping the trajectory of these nations.

Abstract

This thesis explores the evolution of Vietnam's geopolitical positioning, focusing on its conflict with China in 1978 and conducting a comparative historical analysis of both actors. Beginning with an examination of Vietnam's strategic transformations in the decades preceding the conflict, the study highlights the country's pursuit of independence, national unity, and regional influence amid Cold War dynamics. The 1978 Sino-Vietnamese conflict is scrutinized not merely as an isolated military confrontation, but as an outcome of longstanding political, ideological, and territorial tensions, exacerbated by shifting alliances and superpower competition.

Through comparative analysis, the thesis investigates China's motivations behind its aggressive strategy towards Vietnam, emphasizing the interplay between internal political considerations—such as Deng Xiaoping's consolidation of power—and external strategic calculations aimed at reasserting China's influence in Southeast Asia. It further examines Vietnam's diplomatic maneuvering post-conflict, illustrating its strategies for resilience and international realignment, particularly in relation to its alliances with the Soviet Union and later, its reintegration into global diplomatic frameworks.

By deepening the exploration of historical developments in both countries, this research underlines the enduring impact of the 1978 conflict on Sino-Vietnamese relations and regional stability. It underscores the continued significance of historical grievances and territorial disputes in shaping current diplomatic strategies and security policies in Southeast Asia. The thesis concludes by reflecting on the implications for current international relations, notably China's approach to regional diplomacy and Vietnam’s balancing strategies amidst rising geopolitical tensions.

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